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I met a “wolf” in the second half of January.

Due to radiational cooling, it has been cold all day. I don’t feel like going outside after school. I could go to grandpa’s house, but it’s a bit far to walk to the bus stop from school. When I take a deep breath, the inside of my nose feels like it’s frozen. I bury my nose into my scarf to protect it from the wind. I see something red dripping in front of me.

“...Blood?”

On top of the pure white snow are drops of red blood. The contrast between the colours makes it clear that it’s the colour of fresh blood. It leads into the grass off the path.

“I wonder… Whose it is?” My voice trembles. I follow it, and peek into the grass.

I don’t see anything. Nothing happens when I call out. Am I overthinking it? Maybe the blood is just from someone who fell and got hurt, and they just took a rest there. It’s cold out, so the sidewalk is slippery. After coming to that conclusion, I start to leave.

“Grrrr…” I hear a deep groaning sound.

I push the grass away to reveal a wolf. No, it’s probably just a dog, but it’s features look powerful like a wolf’s. It has grey fur, and it’s bigger than Hector.

“Oh…”

It snarls at me, showing its teeth. It must be angry. What if it attacks me?! I take a step back, but it doesn’t jump at me.

“...Are you hurt?”

I somehow find myself talking to the wolf. There’s a cut on its front paw, with blood coming out. The wolf must have decided that I won’t do anything bad, so it licks its paw. With each lick, more blood spills onto the snow. It must have just gotten this injury. Even just looking at it, I can tell it must be painful.

I’m worried, so I try to approach it, but the wolf snarls at me again. It's understandable since it’s injured. However, I can’t just leave it here. I slowly, gradually close the instance between us. I take my time, until the wolf is convinced I’m not it’s enemy. It takes about 30 minutes.

The time passes quietly, with the only sound being the dry bamboo grass shaking with the wind. I can’t feel my fingers or toes, and my cheeks are tingling, but I’m finally sitting next to the wolf. It doesn’t like it when I try to pet it, but at least it doesn’t see me as a threat anymore.

But, I can’t take something so big to a clinic. I decide to call Isozaki-sensei for help. We take the wolf to the vet in his car. Sure enough, the wound on its foot could have been life threatening if it wasn’t treated. The vet says that it’s an Alaskan malamute, and they were bred to be sled dogs. But to me, that dog was a wolf.

So I decide to name it Wolf. I learned later that it was female, so I think I should have given her a cuter name. Wolf’s injury needs surgery, but because of her treatment, she was able to stand up again soon after. She recovered quickly, so she didn’t need to stay in the hospital for very long.

I beg my mom, and in the end, she lets me keep Wolf, but Wolf doesn’t accept it. She’s innocent and cheerful like Hector, but she never lets out a single bark, and her injuries aren’t completely healed so she always just sits in the corner of the room. When I try to pet her head, she turns away. If I keep persisting, she lets out a low growl. She’s not aggressive, but my mom

is scared of her. I still love her just as much, though. It feels like she resembles Sakurako-san somehow.

Wolf always sleeps on a cushion on the floor in my room at night. I feel a gaze and lift my head, and see that she's staring at me. It's like she's watching over me. Whenever anyone visits, she always goes to the door before me, and keeps her head low until she knows that the person is safe. The only time she wags her tail a bit is when I hold up one of her favourite treats, a pig ear. Even if it seems impossible now, with time, I think she's really become "my dog". I believe that if we spend enough time together, I'll be able to touch her.

However, the day after the vet said Wolf's wound was healed, she disappeared. She slipped through the door when the postman came. I chased her as fast as I could, but I didn't make it. She had disappeared, without me ever touching her. I've been left alone. After that, she never returned. She would never watch over me at night again.

First Bone: Bloody Valentine's Day

Part 1

Hokkaido's winters are warm. Of course, not outside. February is one of the coldest parts of the year in Asahikawa. The lowest temperature is around -13 degrees on average. In the past, it's gotten to -41 degrees. Since the highest temperature is usually still below freezing, it's cold all day long. When the temperature reaches 1 degree, the weatherman always says, "it's gonna be warm today~" with a small laugh,

But inside, it's always warm. It's not always because it's a luxury, but usually because if you don't keep the house warm, the water pipes will freeze up and burst in the middle of the night. Apparently it's not very energy efficient to just warm up the house when it gets cold at night. Fortunately, most houses are airtight. It warms up during the day, so it stays warm all night. As a result, it's not unusual for the house to be around 20 degrees in the daytime. Thanks to Hokkaido's winters, ice cream sells well even in the winter. During that time of year, the energy bill can be a matter of life or death. Since it costs so much to repair a burst pipe, there isn't much of a choice. Even when I know there's a blizzard outside, sometimes I have to take off my blazer because I'm starting to sweat… It gives me an indescribable feeling of guilt.

Though, I don't like the cold either. Right now, this is the sweat of hard work, not from the warmth.

"Yeah, looks good."

Isozaki-sensei, my home room teacher, looks at the acrylic resin in my hands and nods.

"Isn't there an easier way to do this?"

I've been spending this morning using sandpaper in the warmed up science prep room. In my hand in a small square of acrylic resin with a tiny bird bone inside of it. Isozaki-sensei is using acrylic to harden skeletal specimens so they're easier to use as teaching materials.

However, apparently the surface of the resin hardened specimen has to be carefully filed and polished to make it shiny.

“We could use the grinder, but it leaves them rough, and the vibration can cause the specimens and resin to separate, so the specimen itself might deteriorate.”

“Then we really do have to do them one by one?”

“Yeah.”

“This is hurting my hands.”

“I know, right?” Isozaki-sensei nods understandingly.

Although I’m willing to help, it doesn’t look like he has any intention of letting me escape from this.

“...” I wrinkle my brow without realizing it.

“What, do you have a complaint?”

“No… I was just thinking… this is difficult.”

When I agreed to help in the beginning, I didn’t think it would be so hard. After all, I have to use such a small file to carefully, patiently, endlessly file away at each one. It’s just a matter of filing it down, but even if it seems simple enough, I can’t be sloppy. The mental fatigue is probably gonna impact my classes tomorrow.

“Me too… It was more expensive than I expected,” Isozaki-sensei mutters while removing an acrylic specimen from the silicon mold.

My hands stiffen for a moment.

“I get it! That’s why I’m helping, isn’t it?!”

I took in a stray dog named Wolf last month. She was hurt, so she needed surgery. Isozaki-sensei helped pay for her treatment, and since she was my dog, he said I should help him to make up for it. Unfortunately, I’m not looking after her anymore. Still, I have to keep my promise.

“Well, do your best,” Isozaki-sensei says with a grin. His eyes don’t look happy, though.

“How… Many of these did you make?” I say in an unintentionally tearful voice.

“Who knows. It’s not like knowing will make it any easier.”

“...”

What a heartless person. I can’t sigh, since I’ll inhale the acrylic powder, so I look up in the air, seeking salvation. Of course, there’s nobody there to save me. That’s the reason I’m trapped in the science prep room every day, early in the morning and after school. Well, he basically saved Wolf’s life. I heard in a superhero movie once that “with great power comes great responsibility.” I don’t have any other choice. I get back to work, even if there’s no end in sight.

“...Has Wolf-chan come back yet?”

“No. I contacted the animal control centre.”

“I see…”

She might have gotten hurt again, and someone else picked her up. If she found a new owner and she’s happy, then… Maybe it’s for the best.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll see her again someday.”

We’ll meet again, huh? I give a sarcastic smile. I truly hope so.

“Ah, Tatewaki-kun!”

While I’m heading to class after finishing my morning work, someone suddenly calls me from down the hall.

“Good morning, Kougami.”

“Good timing, I forgot where I put my bag.”

Who would it be other than Kougami? Somehow, I feel like her skirt is shorter than usual today. She’s not wearing her usual black tights, either. She has knee high socks instead. I pull my gaze away and shake my head a bit.

“What’s up? Did something happen?”

“...Shouldn’t I be asking you the same thing?”

“Huh? Well...” I can’t just say that I was captivated by her ‘absolute territory’. “I was just wondering if you were cold since it’s winter…”

My attempt to deceive her just makes her furrow her brow at me.

“Not really. I don’t catch colds very often, so don’t worry. I put on my jersey when I go to and from school,” Kougami replies nonchalantly, and holds a paper bag to her chest.

“Oh, this is a book I borrowed.”

“Ah… Is it interesting?”

“Yeah. Do you have some free time after school today?”

“Ah… Sorry, I have plans today.”

“...I see,” Kougami says, and pauses for a moment. “With Sakurako-san?” She quickly adds.

“No, Isozaki-sensei. I’m helping him make a specimen right now.”

“I see… Hey, what happened to your hand?” Kougami asks, tilting her head to the side. I didn’t even realize that I was rubbing my red, stinging hand against my stomach.

“Huh? Oh, I was just using some sandpaper and-”

“It’s bright red… Hold on for a minute.”

Without waiting for me to finish talking, she widens the neck of her blazer, and pulls something out of the chest pocket.

“Kougami?”

“Stay still, I have some hand cream,” she says, holding a small tube.

She opens the tube, grabs my hands, and squeezes some cream out onto them. Her hands are a little cold, probably because her legs are bare. But it smells good, like flowers. The hand cream and the scent of her hair…

“I-I’m fine, it’s okay!”

“No way. It’s cold and dry this time of year. If you don’t take care of it, it’ll crack and get worse.”

A girl is holding my hands in the hallway, of course people are staring. It’s embarrassing. I decide to resist.

“I get that, but… I can do it myself.”

“Is that so?”

She had been rubbing the cream on my hands like a massage. She sounds disappointed, somehow. I feel hot, and my ears are itchy.

“I got it from my aunt. It has a strong scent, and it’s made with shea butter, so it should be gentle on your hands. I’ll give it to you, Tatewaki-kun.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine. There’s not much left, so don’t worry about it. It makes my hands smooth, but I don’t really like the scent. I didn’t want it to go to waste, so I was troubled over it.”

“I see… Thanks.”

“No problem. Well, see you later!”

Before I can finish thanking her properly, the bell rings. Kougami rushes off, with her black hair and shorter than usual skirt swaying as she runs… She’s so kind, smells good, and she’s cute. I turn back to wave to her before going to class, and my chest throbs for a second.

“Oh, sorry…”

Someone bumps my arm. Apparently I’m standing in the way of people trying to get through the door. I only realize after apologizing who it was that bumped into me.

“I… Imai.”

He’s standing right in front of me. Imai is my friend. He’s looking me straight in the eye. He looks grumpy, as usual, but somehow his eyes look more serious than normal. He might be angry.

“Morning, Imai.”

“...Mm.”

Does he not want to talk to me? I suddenly feel really guilty. Imai does have a crush on Kougami, after all. I wonder how long he was watching us? Did he see my whole conversation with her? Well, it’s not like we talked about anything I should feel guilty about. But if he saw her rubbing cream on my hand… He might have really misunderstood.

“Hey, um…”

Before I can explain myself, he walks by with a sullen expression. Suddenly, someone taps me on the back of the head with a book.

“Shoutarou, home room is starting.”

It’s Isozaki-sensei. I reluctantly sit down at my desk.

Part 2

I always think about a lot of things while doing repetitive tasks. While sanding down the resin, I can’t help but think about Imai. In the end, I just want to clear everything up as soon as I can. I want him to know that I understand his feelings for Kougami, too. Eventually, my hands start to get tired, so I relax for a bit and let out a sigh. I decide to put some of the hand cream on. I know just how much to put on, thanks to Kougami putting it on my hand before. The sweet scent somehow reminds me of Kougami.

“Must be nice, having L’Occitane.”

“Stop that, I just got it from Kougami.”

Isozaki-sensei takes the hand cream while I’m trying to recover my pride as a man.

“Moisturizing is important during this time of year.”

He rubs some cream on his hands. He looks more familiar with it than me. He has big hands, but his fingers are long, like Sakurako-san’s. His nails are pretty, too.

“Are your nails…?”

“My nails? Oh, yeah, I buff them,” he replies calmly.

“...”

“What is it?”

“Nothing…”

I’ve heard rumours that he goes to beauty salons… Maybe they’re true. That’s all I can think about when I see his nails. I didn't think he’s interested in much other than flowers and himself.

“Actually, if you have time to buff your nails, can’t you finish these specimens on your own?”

“I don’t wanna, since my hands will get rough.”

“That’s the only reason?!”

“I don’t like hurting my hands, I hate doing repetitive tasks like this, the powder gets stuck to me, I don’t have the motivation to keep at it, and I don’t like the smell, either.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have asked. He keeps listing more and more reasons. He seriously does hate it. It’s giving me a headache. Anyway, I should be grateful to him for helping with Wolf. Even when she disappeared, he helped search for her. Words aren’t enough to express how grateful I am.

I work for another 2 hours in the science prep room. It’s 6pm by the time I leave. Of course, there’s still more work to be done next time. Since it’s supposed to snow tomorrow, I want to finish working quickly so I can help shovel snow at Sakurako-san’s house. It’s not a huge rush, but I don’t know how long it’ll take. It’s going to be a long day. Well, it’s fine, since I don’t go out much after school during the winter. I call Sakurako-san at night like usual, with nothing in particular to report. I’m starting to think that what happened with Imai wasn’t that serious. If he’s mad, I’ll just tell him it was a misunderstanding.

However, my everyday life changes completely the next day. That evening, I still didn’t know about the maliciousness sneaking up on me.

The next day, I arrive at school early. When I put my feet in my indoor shoes, I notice something’s different.

“...Ah.”

The shoelaces on both of them are torn. No, not torn. They were obviously cut by something sharp. Even if they had broken naturally, it’s unlikely that it would happen to both at the same time. A chill runs up my spine.

I look at the nearby shoeboxes. It’s still early, though, so there aren’t many people here yet. I look toward the one diagonally above mine. It stands out among all the empty boxes. Imai’s hiking boots are there - he’s already at school. The tennis club has morning practice.

Recently Imai's arm has been sore, so his club activities have been more focused on training his body. During the cold months, he runs around the school, or builds muscle in the gym.

Looking at the shoe boxes of the other students, very few of them are at school already. My heart drops, and I feel anxious.

"..."

Something I don't even want to imagine passes through my mind. No, it couldn't have been… Imai isn't that kind of guy. I know that for sure. However, what happened yesterday crosses my mind. The way he glared at me, full of anger,

"...Imai."

The moment I say that, I feel slightly dizzy. I can't believe that Imai would do this. I don't want to believe it. I'd normally never think like that. I can't get that awful thought out of my head. The murderer manipulates peoples' hearts, and robs them of their sphenoid bones - Hanabusa. Even Sakurako-san has been manipulated by him. No… that can't be.

"I… won't believe it."

I pull myself together, and put on my shoes. I pull out both the laces. It's a little difficult to walk, but it can't be helped. Filled with unspeakable anxiety, I head straight to where Isozaki-sensei is.

"A string? ...Will this work?"

He offers me some pink string.

"Anything is fine, it's only for today."

Pink string for my white shoes…? It's not like I have a better option. It's better than nothing.

"It's too bad about your shoelaces."

"...It is what it is.."

I don't want to talk about this any more, so I get to work. I don't want to be doing this forever, after all.

As the day goes by, I talk with Imai like usual. He acts a little unfriendly and unhappy, just like normal. He's been this way for a long time. But what if it's because he's just hated me this whole time? I can't help but worry about it. I thought we were friends, but maybe I'm the only one who thought that. I'm sure that I'm not acting like my normal self, since I'm worrying about all of this.

"Hey… Is something wrong?"

I'm asked after school ends. I don't know how to respond, so I give a vague answer and brush it off. Those simple words must be frustrating to listen to.

After school, I head to Sakurako-san's house. It's not like I'm going there to escape. I just need to help shovel snow. At least if I go there, there won't be anything bad waiting for me.

"I was waiting for you, boy!"

"What?"

"I found a grey heron corpse. I was thinking of waiting until you got here, but I couldn't help it, so I already got started!"

I take back what I just said.

“But… I only came here to shovel snow and walk Hector.”

“There’s no need to be shy. Come on, come help me.”

Sakurako-san drags me to the living room with delight. Hector is next to her, looking just as happy. He’s probably happy because of the stench of a rotting corpse.

“You’re doing it inside the house?”

“It’s too cold outside. It’s a shame that I can only take the bones of animals small enough to fit on the cassette stove.”

With that, she takes me to the living room table where she has the cassette stove set up. I wish we were using an aquarium like Sawa-san. He taught me about a new bone collecting method recently where you put bones in a temperature controlled tank of water, and leave it for several days. Apparently it doesn’t stink.

But this is how she does it. I’m not sure if she knows about it. Perhaps simmering them is the best way for her. However, as soon as soon as the scent of death hits me, I feel sick. I’d like to talk about what happened today before I start feeling weak.

Gran brings me a cup of tea, and puts some peppermint oil under her nose in a desperate attempt to mask the smell. I have to help with the bone removal. I use a toothbrush to gently remove the meat left after the bones have been simmered. The Kujo house was built in the Meiji era, so it has withstood many long, cold winters. (Meiji is 1868-1912) However, with the room being warmed by the daruma stove, long sleeves are a bit too warm.

In the living room where the windows are foggy from the heat, Sakurako-san faces toward the animal simmering in the stockpot. She’s wearing a white apron, as if she’s cooking. But of course, this isn’t cooking, and it smells horrible. A year ago, I never would have thought this would be happening. I’m starting to get used to the scent of decomposition.

I used to always try to be “a child who wouldn’t be scolded by others”. It caused me to be a sneaky kid. I grew up being conscious of how I looked in the eyes of adults. Until middle school, I was average, had no expectations placed on me, and wasted all my time. I was obsessed with making sure adults didn’t think badly of me. It probably started when I went to the movies with my grandma when I was in grade 2.

I was excited to see my favourite superhero movie, so I was more restless than usual. We happened to pass by an acquaintance of my grandma’s who said **“**this is why they say that kids raised by their grandparents are spoiled,” and laughed. My grandma laughed too, but she looked angry. I secretly asked my mom what they meant by that. It meant that people who are raised by their grandparents get everything they want, and won’t grow up into proper adults. Even now, I get a little annoyed when I remember that. I still remember my mom’s sad expression, and my grandma’s hand clenching with anger.

This world is full of prejudice. People even said insulting things to my mom, since my dad isn’t around anymore. As I got older, I started to understand. It wasn’t just me, or my mom, but my grandma was insulted, too. They’d take one look and think she was doing something unusual. It’s been a little over a year since I met Sakurako-san. She’s changed me so much, in such a short time…

“This bird sure has a long beak. It’s neat.”

Here I am, taking the meat off this animal's bones, thinking it's "neat." A year ago, I never would have thought I'd get to this point. Now I'm telling Sakurako-san my honest opinions.

"It really is. Cormorants and albatrosses have long beaks like this, too. Theirs are a little thicker, and the end is curved down. In comparison, the grey heron's beak is completely straight and sharp. Grey herons approach from above when they hunt. Having a straight beak like this helps them poke it into the water with less resistance. Woodcock beaks are neat, too. They look like a hair clip."

I smile when I see the heron's skull, slender like a hairstylist's scissors. Recently, I've come to understand why Sakurako-san likes bones. Bones reveal hidden things, like how an animal lived or evolved. At least, I didn't know that until I saw the bones. Even though they're such different sizes, the leg of a goat and giraffe look the same.

"Oh that's right, I forgot. I was going to teach you how to remove a bird's wings this time. You can cut the humerus, but if you remove the joint, it won't come out right. Well, it's fine. I'll definitely let you do it next time."

"No… It's fine, you don't have to do that."

"Actually, I think it's time I teach you how to peel off the skin."

"How wonderful."

But I'm not going to make specimens like this the way she does. Not that I've decided what to do with my future yet. I know I don't want to follow the same path as her, but I wish I could do things like this with her, even 10 years from now. At least, that's what I'd like for now. I know that it's an impossible request.

"...Did something happen?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You seem down, compared to usual." Sakurako-san suddenly speaks to me, without looking up from her work.

"...Nothing out of the ordinary. Lately, I've been helping Isozaki-sensei with his acrylic specimens. It's just working with delicate things every day."

Somehow, it's hard to tell her the truth. I can't stop obsessing over what happened at school. Even if it's just a prank, I don't want to think that a close friend of mine would do something like that. If I talk to Sakurako-san, she'd probably easily be able to tell me who did it. I don't have the courage to accept it right now. Besides, Sakurako-san has been busy chasing after Hanabusa lately, and she's seemed down ever since that email from him. It's been a long time since she enthusiastically talked about bones with me, so I don't want to cut it short.

"Encasing bones in acrylic! Polishing them is definitely time consuming and tedious."

Sakurako-san immediately takes interest as soon as I mentioned a "specimen," and goes off about different ways to prepare them. Sitting in a warm room, listening to her, it's hard not to fall asleep. I end up missing my chance to tell her what really happened. It seems kind of pathetic that I won't tell her just because she's busy with Hanabusa, but part of me also doesn't want her to know.

Maybe the biggest reason is that I don't want to think about it, either. At least to me, intentionally cutting my stuff with a knife clearly signals ill intent. Still, I could have been mistaken for someone else, or it might have just been a prank pulled by someone. Still, even if either of those were the reason, it's still a bad thing to do. I shouldn't be thinking so hard about

this, but even when I think about it later on, it still doesn't seem right to me. At least, that's what I think right now.

Part 3

When I get to school, my shoelaces have been cut again.

"Well, it's fine. I brought spare laces today, anyway."

Besides, who cared enough to cut the pink strings I had on them? I ignore it, and focus on putting the new laces that I bought yesterday in. I'll start bringing a shoe bag starting today. They won't get cut if I don't leave them at school.

This morning, Imai arrived at school before me again. But that's always the case. Besides, Imai is irrelevant to this. The day goes by as usual, and it's time to go home. I hardly spoke with Imai today. Did Imai notice I'm avoiding him? I don't think he even spoke to me at all. Anxious thoughts fill my head. I hope the pranks stop soon. At least if I bring my shoes home, they won't be able to mess with them. It'll be okay now. However, during the 4th block the results of the math quiz are announced, and I did horrible. It's probably because I can't concentrate because of the harassment. Yeah, it must be.

The next morning when I'm leaving my house, there's a dead mouse laying in front of me. It startles me, but it's not as if there's no mice around here. I don't see them often, though. I read in a book that house mice don't hibernate. I'm sure it was attacked by a cat or something. Even if Sakurako-san would be, I'm not very happy with the start of my day. I decide to just leave it as it is, and move the mouse to the corner of the yard before leaving for school. Somehow, I feel like today is going to be another bad day.

When I arrive at school, my shoes are safe, of course. Since I took them home, nothing happened to them. I should have noticed in the morning, but time passes as usual until I notice something at lunch time.

"...Huh?"

"What's wrong, Tatewaki?"

"...No, it's nothing."

During lunch break, I was talking to a few classmates about a game I've been into lately. When I remember I should eat the lunch I brought, I notice that it isn't there.

"..."

I must have forgotten it somewhere, but that can't be. The three sweet breads and coffee milk should have been together in the plastic bag on the coat hook in my locker.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Not really, I just need to stop by the store quickly. I just remembered that I didn't stop by the convenience store this morning."

I force a laugh, and leave my circle of friends. For a moment, my eyes meet Imai's, but I pretend not to notice.

Maybe I should have said something about the harassment to someone else. I didn't realize that until later. For now, I'm just panicked about how it's escalating. Who should I talk to about it for now? Every day, I hope that it'll stop by tomorrow. In the end, I'm plagued by these small acts the next day, every time. It's always just small things, like garbage in my desk, but it's still clearly targeted at me. Of course, it's not a reason for me to not study.

I try bringing my lunch from the convenience store to Isozaki-sensei's room in the morning. I thought it might be alright after that. One day, when I grab my melon bread, I notice the cookie is moister than usual. I notice something flash for a moment.

"...Ugh."

I would have eaten it if I hadn't noticed then. There's a small needle sticking out of it. It seems like a normal sewing needle. I freeze in place. When I check my Danish pastry and sweet bread, I find that they're both covered in tiny holes. I look further, and find four needles in total. I'm terrified of what would have happened if I ate those. It's definitely not just random mischief anymore. Imai isn't in the classroom right now, so he's probably in a club meeting or something. I can't help but think that maybe he's avoiding me.

I can't help but think of when it could have happened. During PE, Imai said that his arm hurt, so he went to the nurse's office. What if he stopped by the classroom on his way? No way, he couldn't have. What am I doing, doubting Imai like that? I push those thoughts away. Fortunately, it's the weekend now, so I don't have to go to school.

My weekend is peaceful. I shovel snow for Sakurako-san, walk Hector, and stay over at my Nagayama grandpa's house. My grandpa is happy that I'm unusually invested in practicing judo with him, but I'm not actually that happy about going to the dojo. I want to have a stronger will, instead. I wanted to get so tired that I can't think about anything else, but most of all, I want some way to confront all of this.

Strength is mysterious. It can be relieving, or sad. When I realize that I really just want to get stronger to protect myself, I start to feel angry.

Part 4

The amount of money I can spend on lunch is limited. I make misshapen rice balls for myself on Monday. I got the ingredients for it from my grandma's house, since she made candied saury for me. Since the saury was made in a pressure cooker, the bones are soft enough to eat. It's sweet and salty, and the ginger accents it nicely, so it goes well with rice balls. However, I probably won't end up being able to eat them.

I don't have PE on Mondays, but I'm worried that something will happen while moving between other classes. I go through extra effort to put dust and hair on the aluminum foil at my house. It seems that it was thrown on the floor and put in the garbage.

"Crap, again…"

I was expecting it this time, so I just give up and go to the store. Since I used to get there later because I wasn't expecting it, there was only green bean paste anpan and unpopular breads left, but today I'm early. When I get there, the crowd is so big that I'd have to fight to get

through it. Especially since recently the store has gotten a new, delicious kind of bread, so there's even more people here than usual.

While wondering what to do, I make eye contact with Sedoya-sensei, my assistant homeroom teacher, who is inside the crowd. He mouths "want me to buy it for you?" So I raise 3 fingers and shout back "it doesn't matter what kind!" Fortunately, he buys me a potato salad sandwich, hot dog, and a burdock root baguette. It goes a bit over my 500 yen budget, but it looks delicious.

"Thank you so much, I think I'll survive now."

"But… You're still growing, are you okay with just bread?"

"Well, it'll work out."

Besides, he must have thought about my health while buying these. The two of us move to the lunch room, and find some empty seats to sit in. All the breads are pretty big to match the appetite of high school students. The burdock root baguette is particularly exquisite. The bread is cut horizontally, and filled with burdock kinpira mixed with mayonnaise. The outside of the baguette is crispy, while the inside is soft and slightly sweet. The occasional spicy piece mixed with mayonnaise makes it even better. The texture is a little different from regular burdock salad. The slight acidity and soy sauce flavour go well with the baguette. This type of bread is delicious, but it's not the kind I'd normally buy for myself. I'll have to thank Sedoya-sensei.

"My first thought was 'burdock…?' but this is really good."

"I've had the same kind of sandwich before. I thought it was good, so I thought you might like it, too," Sedoya-sensei says with a smile.

He started this year as a new graduate, and since he's shy and quiet, students sometimes pick on him. He even got the nickname "lanky four-eyes."

"My top recommendation is the okonomiyaki bread."

"Okonomiyaki…?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately, they were out of stock today."

"Oh…"

When I head back to the classroom, Imai is there. Even though it was a little awkward, I ate my lunch together with Sedoya-sensei.

Now that I think about it, I haven't spoken with Imai today. I barely have enough time to sit down before afternoon classes start. For some reason, it's hard to make eye contact with Imai, so I stare out the window instead. As usual, everything is grey and snowy. I hold in a sigh. Even though everything outside looks the same, my everyday life has gotten all distorted. I never thought I'd doubt Imai like this. I shouldn't have to worry like this about my closest friend. Phantom's words keep repeating in my head. Hanabusa - an evil person who drives others mad to keep his own hands clean.

"..."

"The black poison of hatred destroys human reason." Hanabusa said that to me.

Sakurako-san told me not to trust anyone, not even those closest to me. But what if Hanabusa deceived Imai? I look over at Imai, who is sitting in the row next to me. He has his elbow on the desk, looking bored. I suddenly feel sick. Above all else, I'm angry at my own reaction. Isn't this just what Hanabusa wants me to think?

"I-Imai" I work up my courage and greet him.

“...Hm?”

“Um… Oh yeah, did you buy the new issue of that manga?”

“I already bought it, but you weren’t there at lunch today. I lent it to Takagi first.”

“Oh, I see. I thought I’d try the new bread at the shop, so I ended up eating it with the teacher…”

“Was the bread good?”

I talk to Imai for the first time in a long while until the teacher shows up right before the warning bell. All we talked about was having bread for lunch. The burdock bread and the okonomiyaki bread. Imai says “then I guess I’ll have to buy bread tomorrow” and laughs a bit. At least he seems the same as usual.

Yeah, I’ve decided. I definitely can’t doubt the people I know. There’s absolutely no way that Imai would betray me. He wouldn’t. He’d never let Hanabusa control him. I’ve stopped doubting Imai. Then someone else is the culprit. I’ll wait and see what happens for a little longer. Maybe they’ll get bored if I don’t react.

“This specimen seems difficult to make. Sakurako-san said you should be good at it, though.”

“Sakurako-san did?”

I smile bitterly. It’s the first day in a long time that I haven’t had to stay after school working on specimens, so I decide to get tea with Kougami at our usual shop.

“Look at this, I brought it,” Kougami says, and pulls a transparent, acrylic resin cube out of her bag.

“What is it?”

When I look into it, it appears to be a piece of bone from a fish.

“It’s the bone from the base of the pectoral fin on a red sea bream. Apparently it’s considered good luck.”

“Wow…”

“Apparently other fish, like the mahi-mahi have this bone, but Sakurako-san said that the red sea bream has the cutest one. It also has the silliest face,” Kougami says, giggling happily.

She proudly shows off what she’s learned from Sakurako-san. Hearing talk about bones coming from Kougami’s mouth is a little jarring. She looks really cute when she’s smiling, though. Even though I decided not to doubt Imai, I still feel guilty about meeting Kougami. Still, she’s my friend, too.

“Want a piece of my scone?” She says, pointing to a kuromame scone on her plate. She must have noticed that I finished my chiffon cake fast.

“No, I’m fine. I’m not that hungry.”

“That’s not like you.”

“It’s nothing, really. I just had a surprisingly full lunch.”

I tell her about how I got bread from the shop today, and how good it was. Apparently Kougami has tried the okonomiyaki that Sedoya-sensei recommended.

“It’s made with rice flour, so it’s all puffy. It has cabbage, tenkasu, and yakisoba inside, and it’s made in the Hiroshima style. They even added nori on top.”

Hmm. It does sound good. After thinking about the okonomiyaki bread, I’m feeling hungry again. While we’re talking, Kougami suddenly looks at me like she noticed something.

“...Now that I think about it, did you stop bringing your own lunch?”

“Oh, yeah, I did. Sometimes I make onigiri, but I usually just get it at the convenience store.”

Every month, my mom gives me 12 000 yen to buy lunch with. When I was in middle school, my grandma used to always make me lunch. After she died, I felt like I didn’t really need a whole lunchbox, so I decided to just pick something up on my way to school. Even after getting into high school, I just continued doing the same thing.

“So you spend around 500 yen per day?”

“Yeah, around there.”

Kougami listens to my explanation, then stares down at her tea in thought.

“Then… How about I make you a lunch for 300 yen?”

“Huh?”

“I make my own lunch every morning. If you’re okay with leftovers from the shop, I can make you one, too,” she says, and lifts her head.

She says she can’t guarantee the flavour, though. It’s probably just modesty, though. Kougami doesn’t give the impression that she’s bad at cooking. I know that sometimes she gets recipes from her grandma. I do housework regularly, but I’m not sure if I’m that good at it. Additionally, her parents run a popular western style restaurant.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Besides, it’s not that much extra work. As long as you pay the ingredient fee reliably.”

Of course I can’t ask her to make one every day, so we settle on twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Just that much makes me happy.

“I’ll bring one tomorrow, then.”

I want to ask if Imai can get one, too… But I miss my chance to say it, because just then, Kougami gets a text from her mom.

“Sorry, I… have to go home for today,” she says, and leaves. I also leave my seat.

I think about going to Sakurako-san’s place, but in the end, I just go straight home. Sakurako-san has been busy lately, so maybe she got some new information. She’s been looking for anything related to Hanabusa. I don’t want to get in her way, so for the past few days I’ve been investigating the truth behind my harassment.

The next day is Tuesday, so Kougami brings me a lunch box. She’ll hold on to the lunch box until noon, so I don’t have to worry about mischief. As soon as Isozaki-sensei and I finish our work in the science room that morning, we hear several loud footsteps, and a girl screaming and coming toward me. No, more accurately, she’s coming toward Isozaki-sensei, who is behind me. It’s still early, but the school is already lively.

It's February 14th. Known on the streets as Valentine's Day, it's a terrifying event where men either catch a glimpse of heaven or hell. But me? I don't have any expectations.

"Isozaki-senseeei!"

Sure enough, about 5 or 6 girls crowd around Isozaki-sensei with chocolate. I head to my class. This year, I got some extra already. Besides my mom and grandma, Shouko-san and gran have already given me chocolate. I didn't get any from Sakurako-san, but I know she's not interested in Valentine's Day, so I wasn't expecting any. So strangely, I don't feel impatient or fidgety at school.

Ever since the incident in Kannondai, we've felt anxious about even the slightest shadow. It feels like Hanabusa is always lurking in the shadows. Instead of chocolate, Sakurako-san has accepted me, which is even better. Sakurako-san, gran, Hector, and me. Spending time with the Kujo family is pure bliss.

"Tatewaki-kun!" Kougami calls out to me from down the hallway.

"Oh, morning."

Somehow, the air around her feels different today. I wonder what it is for a moment, then realize her lips are pink. She must be wearing some makeup. She's always strict about school regulations, but I guess Valentine's Day is different. Her cheeks are slightly flushed, so she must have ran here. She holds out a paper bag.

"...Here."

"Hm?"

It's a small, normal paper bag. I peek inside. There's a small white box with a brown ribbon.

"Tatewaki-kun… Don't tell me that you didn't notice that today was Valentine's Day."

"Huh? No, of course I knew…"

At first, I thought it was the lunch she brought for me. She gives me a suspicious look.

"I made brownies."

"Is this… for me?"

"Yeah, of course… Unless you don't want it?" She gives me an upward glance, looking a little upset. Maybe it's the lipstick, but her lips look fuller than usual.

"It's not that… I just didn't expect to get anything from a girl."

"...Is that right?"

It feels awkward for a moment.

"Oh, but this is just friendship chocolate! I'm planning on giving some to Sakurako-san after school…"

Kougami clears up the confusion. Honestly, I'm relieved.

"Of course! She'll be happy about that," I reply with a smile. She smiles back.

Kougami really loves Sakurako-san. However, Kougami is kinder. I wonder if she thought I'd mind if she only gave chocolate to Sakurako-san, instead of me.

"I'm really glad you brought me some." I accidentally let my true feelings slip from my mouth.

"...Really?"

I wonder if Imai is getting some, too? But the fear is too strong. I still think the harassment will continue to escalate. Just then, I notice Imai coming up the stairs, so I hurriedly

thank Kougami then return to my seat. I feel a little bad about it, so I send her an email saying I was just embarrassed about being in front of other people. Almost immediately I receive a reply saying “understood! I’ll give you your lunch in secret later!”

I feel relieved. Imai seems to be in a good mood this morning, and greets me with “yo” as he passes by. I smile in response. He seems completely normal. It’d be nice if the harassment would stop now, too.

Part 5

At lunch, I eat what Kougami gave me with my classmates. Fortunately, Imai isn’t here. I’ve been wondering what Kougami would make me this whole time. All the side dishes are brown, just like a grandma’s would be. I can’t help but smile. Her seasoning is a bit light out of concern for her health. It’s delicious, but it’s not quite enough. After decimating my lunch, I go off to the shop. On the way, I run into Imai who is on the way back.

“Oh, Shoutarou. Okonomiyaki bread.”

“What?”

Imai shakes his armful of bread. “I got the last 3. I got one for myself, but I’ll sell the other 2 to you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to eat it yesterday?”

“Yeah, but 2 of them?”

“I thought you’d still want one more. So… I got a burdock one.”

After exchanging coins, I end up with 2 okonomiyaki breads and a burdock baguette in my hands. It looks like it’s just a big curry bread from the outside, but since it’s full of yakisoba, it’s dense and filling.

“You didn’t have to get these for me…”

“I just picked them up while I was at it. My sister overslept today.”

His older sister usually makes his lunch for him. I guess he noticed that I’ve been buying lunch at school recently. He bought some for me while he was buying his own lunch today.

“Thanks. Are you heading back to class?” I remember that he wasn’t in the classroom earlier.

“No, I’m eating with some club members today.”

“I see.” I notice something off. “...Then why did you bother getting these for me?”

“I… Thought that if you had some more to eat, you’d feel better.”

“What do you mean?” Did he notice that I’ve been acting weird around him?

“...It’s too bad. I’ll help you look.”

“Huh?”

“Your dog.”

“...Oh.”

I get it now. I knew I shouldn’t have doubted him. It all makes sense now. He just thought I was down about Wolf.

“Thanks.” I thank him from the bottom of my heart. I should have apologized, too.

Imai gives me a weak smile, then heads down the hallway. I'm impressed he can carry that much bread. I'm sure… He isn't the culprit. At the same time, I can't help but doubt that. At least, without Hanabusa, I never would have doubted Imai in the first place. That evil being made me doubt my better judgement. I'm… Frustrated that I can't be strong like Sakurako-san is. But it'll be fine. No matter what happens, I won't doubt Imai anymore. I turn around to head back down the hallway, but I make eye contact with Sedoya-sensei.

"Oh."

He sees the okonomiyaki bread in my hands, and his eyes open wide.

"Are those… The last ones?"

"Yeah, seems like it." I give a small nod.

"I was too late again…" he says, slumping over in disappointment.

"Oh, but I have two… Would you like one?"

"Huh?! Are you sure, Tatewaki-kun?"

"Think of it as thanks for last time."

I kinda feel bad for Imai, since he bought it for me, but Sedoya-sensei looks so disappointed. And to be honest, eating three pieces of bread after eating a whole lunch box is a bit much, even for me.

"Um… Then take this." I hand one of them over to him.

At this point, I've already opened the bag to make sure there weren't any needles in it. Of course it was all clear… There's no reason it wouldn't be. I'm angry at myself for not being able to trust Imai, even now.

"Ah…" Sedoya-sensei tries to hand me some change while taking the bread, but ends up dropping it. "Sorry, I'll pick it up!"

He's pretty clumsy. Since he's earned a mean nickname, you'd think it's because he's such a fragile and weak person, but it actually isn't. Since both of his parents were teachers, his classes are usually strict and inflexible. On the other hand, most of us find it sorta funny seeing him act all strict.

I try to help pick up the coins. I find a 10 yen and a 1 yen coin on the floor, and a 100 yen coin under a grey cabinet. I can't reach it on my own, so I borrow a broom from one of the classrooms to knock it out. In the end, it's just going to end up buying me some fruit milk from the vending machine. Well, as long as it all turned out okay in the end. After all we went through, we somehow end up laughing and talking on our way back to class together. Lunch break is already over halfway done, and there's hardly anyone in the classroom.

"...I'm glad. You looked like you weren't feeling well lately, but you seem better now."

I sit down at my seat, while Sedoya-sensei sits in the seat opposite to me with a smile.

"Really?"

"You don't seem to be worried about grades, so… Is it lovesickness?"

"It absolutely isn't."

"Then you got dumped?"

"...What makes you think I'm having girl trouble?"

I'm not that close with any girls. It's true that I'm not very proactive when it comes to dating, but I also don't feel like I need a girlfriend right now. I have meaning in other parts of my life, and I also have my fair share of problems right now. It'd be perfectly accurate to say, 'I don't

feel like I need romance right now.' I end up just shaking my head while I open a burdock baguette.

"Then what's the matter?"

"..."

I don't know how to answer that. Is it okay to confess to a teacher that I'm being harassed? What if it only makes things worse? Besides, even if I talk to him about it, it's not like he could do anything. It's not that I don't feel like I can rely on Sedoya-sensei, but unlike Isozaki-sensei, he isn't very forceful. I feel like it would just bother him.

"I was… Just thinking that it's hard to truly trust people. I struggle with things like that."

"That is a difficult topic."

I fall back on a safe answer instead. Sedoya-sensei looks up in the air, thinking hard.

"Well… I think you have to start believing in yourself."

"In… myself?"

"If you're convinced you're doing the right thing, then you don't have to worry about it, even if the people around you don't think so," Sedoya-sensei says, closing his eyes.

I reach for the okonomiyaki bread. He playfully blocks my hand. I wait for him to continue speaking.

"The most important thing is to not waver. You have to believe in yourself. As long as you stay strong, it doesn't matter what other people say. You won't need to worry about who you are, or what they think."

Don't waver. Believe in myself. I'm surprised to hear words like that come from someone who seems so timid. I always thought he was the kind of person who didn't care about self confidence. Sure, he's humble, not very flexible, and too serious… But as a teacher, he has a backbone, and knows what he believes in.

"So please do your best to gain self confidence. If you do, I'm sure you'll get a girlfriend some day**...** just kidding. I'm just trying to say something teacher-ish." Sedoya-sensei scratches the back of his head, looking a little embarrassed at what he said.

"No… Thank you very much."

That's right, before I believe in Imai, I have to believe in myself. Sedona-sensei finishes his okonomiyaki bread first, so we part ways. I pick up the remaining bread that Imai gave me. When I rip it in half, I feel a sharp pain in my hand.

"Ugh-"

The bread is dyed bright red in an instant.

"Ahhh!"

There's a deep cut in the middle of my right thumb. There's a sharp razor buried in the middle of the bread.

Part 6

Handkerchiefs are important. Until now, I never really gave them much thought. I think about that while I hold my bloody finger with my other hand.

My heart is pounding. I'm scared. The scent and colour of the blood is making me dizzy. Although I feel sick, I hurry to the school infirmary. I can't run because when I try to, my hand slips and the blood starts to spill. I finally get to the infirmary, and violently kick the door.

"What's wrong?"

It's the school nurse, Higuruma-sensei, who opens the door. When he sees the blood, his expression changes. He has a sturdy body, like a PE teacher. It makes him feel reliable. He applies firm pressure to the wound until the bleeding stops. Seeing him put on nitrile gloves just like Sakurako-san's before touching the wound calms me down a little.

"Since there was a lot of blood, I'll bandage it a little tighter."

It wasn't easy to stop the bleeding. Higuruma-sensei contacts someone else in the school. Before long, Isozaki-sensei enters the room.

"He got cut?"

"Yeah. It finally stopped bleeding."

"Is it deep?"

"Well it isn't shallow. But it didn't seem to cut the nerves, and it's a pretty clean cut. It's close to the joints, so it might be best to get stitches."

"Then… He has to go to the hospital?"

I look away from my wound and lean against the backrest while I listen to the teachers talking. I feel sorta relieved since Isozaki-sensei is here now, but I also feel so sick that my body feels weak.

"But how the hell did you get cut this bad?" Higuruma-sensei turns to me.

"Yeah… What cut you? How?"

"..." I can't answer.

"Shoutarou?" Isozaki-sensei asks in confusion.

"...I don't want to talk about it."

What would I even say? There's no way I can tell them.

"...Should I leave?" Higuruma-sensei says quietly, after quietly taping up my wound so I can go to the hospital.

"Oh… No, you don't have to."

Somehow, I feel apologetic. It's not like it's Higuruma-sensei's fault.

"It's just, uh… I wasn't being careful, so the edge of a box cutter nicked me…" I reluctantly make up an excuse.

"So you're saying you were 'carelessly' using a box cutter on the thumb of your dominant hand, and cut it to the point of needing stitches?" Higuruma-sensei easily sees right through me.

"Well…"

I can't think of a better lie. Before I can say anything, Isozaki-sensei puts his hands on my shoulders.

"...It was a razor."

"A razor?" They both say in unison.

"There was a razor in the bread that I bought. I didn't notice at first, so I got cut when I tried to rip it in half."

I give up on keeping it a secret. Besides, I'm scared to hold it in for any longer than this.

"Seriously?!"

“Yeah… I stuffed the bread into my desk for now.”

Isozaki-sensei goes to the classroom, and returns with my okonomiyaki bread. They both carefully examine the bread. They find a disposable, rectangular razor inside.

“This is a terrible prank… We should investigate the other bread, too.”

“No…!”

They both get up, looking pale. I hurriedly grab Higuruma-sensei’s coat with my uninjured hand.

“You can’t! The other bread will be fine, it was only mine!”

They both look at each other, then at me.

“It’s always… just been mine.’

“Always?”

“Yeah, always…”

I prepare myself, then tell them the whole story. I spill everything about the harassment.

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?!” Isozaki-sensei yells after listening to everything.

“Because...”

I don’t even have to say it. The offender is probably someone at this school. It’s likely that it’s one of my classmates. Isozaki-sensei makes a displeased expression, and makes me stand up.

“...Are you mad?”

“Yes, quite. But for now, you need to go to the hospital.”

I guess he’s going to be the one to take me there. While he makes preparations, Higuruma-sensei takes me to the entranceway. It’s like he’s a bodyguard or something. He probably just doesn’t want me to go alone.

Soon after, Isozaki-sensei returns after making arrangements for other teachers to handle the rest of his classes and homeroom. It’s rare to see him running like this. Even when there was an obstacle relay for the teachers on sports day, Isozaki-sensei walked calmly. When we get in the car, he looks really displeased. Whether it was because he’s so angry, or because his car isn’t very suited to driving on the winter roads, he stays silent until we arrive at the hospital.

Fortunately, the wound didn’t damage my nerves. However, as Higuruma-sensei said, I need stitches because it’s close to the joint. The anesthesia hurts for a moment, and makes me start shaking. Even though it was only 2 stitches, I feel sick.

“...Are you okay?”

When I return to the waiting room, Isozaki-sensei puts my blazer that I had taken off around my shoulders. I notice that the sleeve is a little cold and wet. I guess he wiped the blood off of it.

“...Is my mom going to be mad?”

“Depends on the situation,” Isozaki-sensei says briefly.

I sit in a chair, and hang my head, He looks pale. He leans against me and sighs. The waiting room has settled down now, so there’s only a few elderly people chatting. There’s a gentle song from a well known anime movie playing from a music box in the background. I close my eyes, and try to calm down. I can still see the red blood flowing. My mom is going to be worried again.

“Well… I haven’t contacted your family yet.”

“...You haven’t?”

Just as I’m about to ask him what he means, loud footsteps and the sound of slippers hitting the floor break the silence in the room.

“Boy!” I hear a familiar voice call out to me.

“Sakurako-san…?”

“Well… I thought it would be better to call her.” Isozaki-sensei says, shrugging his shoulders.

“I heard you got hurt, are you okay?”

She rushes over to me while taking off her white coat. She must have just gotten out of the bath, since her hair is damp and she smells faintly of soap. She’s wearing jeans and a striped knit top.

“It’s pretty early to be having a bath.”

“I was boiling a weasel skull that had already started rotting. I just couldn’t get the smell of death off of me… More importantly, what happened to you?”

The skull, especially the brain, smells really bad when preparing a skeleton. I remember Sawa-san telling me that before. I try to force a smile. Today, I feel like I’d rather keep talking to her about bones.

“Boy, you have to tell me,” she says forcefully.

I feel scared to talk about it again.

“...There was a razor in the bread he bought for lunch. It seems like someone has been harassing him lately.” Since I won’t answer, Isozaki-sensei tells her about my injury instead.

Sakurako-san’s expression turns grim.

“Isozaki! How could you let this happen when you’re supposed to be responsible for him?!” She lashes out at Isozaki-sensei.

“There was nothing he could have done!” I try to protect him, but now Sakurako-san’s anger is pointed at me.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me about this in the first place?”

“Because… You seemed like you were busy, so-“

“Hanabusa can manipulate anyone. If you don’t cooperate with me, I can’t protect you.”

“But…! There’s things I can’t talk about, even to you.”

Her anger is contagious. I start to raise my voice. Maybe it’s from the bleeding, or maybe it’s the shock from the injury, but as soon as I try to stand up, my vision goes blurry. I end up crouching on the floor.

“You shouldn’t make any unnecessary movements. Just take slow, deep breaths.”

I feel nauseated. Isozaki-sensei rubs my back, helping me calm down.

“...Is your injury okay?”

Sakurako-san must have realized how emotional she got. She takes a deep breath, stretches her hand out for me.

“I got two stitches in my finger. It didn’t damage any nerves.”

“I see…”

I take her hand and sit back in my chair. Sakurako-san sits next to me, and puts her hand on my shoulder so show her sympathy. Her hand is warm.

“...It’s Imai.”

“Imai?”

“He’s my best friend, he likes Kougami.”

I really want to just stay silent, but feeling Sakurako-san’s warmth makes me feel guilty for not speaking up.

“...Everything started the day after Kougami gave me some of her hand cream. He probably saw that she gave me chocolate and the hand cream, so…”

I swallow my saliva. Somehow, it tastes bitter.

“Then… It was Imai? There’s no way…” Isozaki-sensei raises one eyebrow, puzzled.

“I thought so, too. But when I think about how it could have been Hanabusa, I can’t say for sure…”

I take a deep breath. I remind myself about what Sedoya-sensei said about believing in myself.

“But I don’t think it was Imai after all. He’s not the kind of guy to do something like this. If he was mad about something, he’d say it straight to my face. I don’t think he would do something to hurt me.”

“For sure… As his teacher, I don’t think Imai is the kind of kid to do something like this.”

However, Sakurako-san furrows her brow.

“If that man is involved, it’s dangerous to trust someone so easily, even your best friend.”

“...”

I clench my fists on my lap. There’s a dull ache where my stitches are.

“...Oh well. From now on, talk to Isozaki and I. At least we won’t take sides with Hanabusa.”

Sakurako-san sighs like she’s given up, and looks at Isozaki-sensei. He shrugs at her words.

“Yeah... You can definitely trust me.”

It seems so strange to hear that coming from him.

“There’s nothing to be surprised about. If you have the opportunity, you’d want to get revenge on that man. That man made your precious ‘flower’ wither.”

Isozaki-sensei’s eyes narrow. I wonder if the “flower” is his former student, Futaba-san…

“Well, anyway, we should probably go back to your school.”

“Huh? You’re going, too?.”

“Of course I am. I can’t just leave you like this. We have to start looking for the truth, boy. I’m worried about you. I’ll definitely find the culprit,” Sakurako-san says, grinning at me. It’s her normal, bright smile.

I feel so relieved that I could cry. I have to rely on her again. Will she ever be able to rely on me, someday? I want to hurry up and become an adult.

Part 7

By the time we get back to the school, classes are already over. Sakurako-san enters through the staff entrance. I ask her if it feels nostalgic, but she just tilts her head to the side a

bit. Walking down the hall with her, I can't help but imagine her as a high school student. When she attended, the uniform would have been different.

She asks me to explain the harassment in detail, but we have to get to the front entrance first. The busiest time for students heading home has passed, so the hallways are pretty calm.

"I see, it started with your shoelaces."

"Yeah. When I got to school in the morning, they were already cut. It happened twice. On the third day, I brought them home with me, so nothing happened." I look around the shoeboxes. "The clubs with morning practice every day are the baseball, soccer, tennis, and basketball clubs. I don't think there's many students other than the ones in those clubs here that early."

"It actually… Might not have been morning."

"Huh?"

"It could have happened any time that you weren't at school."

"Oh…"

It's obvious, now that I think about it. It could have been any time that I left them alone.

"So in other words, it was some time that school wasn't in session, not just morning."

"Well… now that I think about it, you're right."

I'm a little relieved. I have more reason to believe in Imai now.

"After school… Where is your best friend around that time?"

I don't know how to answer. On the first day, I didn't check if his shoes were in the box.

"Recently… He hurt his elbow, so he hasn't been staying as late as usual. I haven't checked when he leaves, though."

Sakurako-san walks around by the front entrance to check for students. It seems that Imai hasn't gone home yet, since his outdoor shoes are still here.

"Did you find anything?"

"Who knows."

"Kujo-san, is there the possibility that it was someone from outside of the school?" Isozaki-sensei asks.

He seems sceptical that a student would maliciously harass someone. Especially in our class, it's pretty laid-back, with no noticeable bullying or cliques.

"On the contrary, I would like to ask if it's that easy for outsiders to come and go from this school? Especially multiple times per day?" Sakurako-san answers Isozaki-sensei's question with more questions.

Sakurako-san was able to enter the school today because there's a teacher with her, and she used to go to this school anyway. Isozaki-sensei tightly wrinkles his brow at her question.

"Well, whatever. Let's go to the classroom." At Sakurako-san's prompting, we leave the entranceway behind.

When she looks down the hallway, Sakurako-san's expression suddenly changes.

"Is something wrong?"

"No… It's just that it seems more disorganized than when I was attending. At least, we were never allowed to leave dust sitting in the hallway."

"It's true that the chairman of the board has changed since you attended… and the system has changed a lot, too. It's even co-ed now." I answer the dissatisfied Sakurako-san.

“...But instead, we’re organizing the specimens now. We’ve been steadily encasing all of them in acrylic.”

“I see… You’ll have to show me next time.” Sakurako-san smiles fondly.

I know that, which is why I’ve been polishing the acrylic specimens so diligently every day, so they look as beautiful as possible.

“Now then… Shoutarou, besides your shoes, what else happened?” Isozaki-sensei stands between us to bring us back to the main topic.

“After that, the bread I had for lunch would have needles in it.”

He clicks his tongue. “If something like that was happening, you should have told someone immediately. What if other students got injured?”

“Oh… I’m sorry.”

I thought that I was specifically being targeted. Still, as he said, it could have been a big deal if I was wrong.

“Needles, huh… Did you keep any?”

“No… I threw them away. Eventually it escalated to the person dumping my lunch, or leaving garbage on my desk.”

We arrive at the classroom while I’m talking, but now I’m at a loss for words.

“...What?”

Even from the entrance, I can tell something is wrong.

”Wh… What is this?!”

The area under my desk is covered in dirt.

“Wow…”

“My cyclamen!”

I try to get to my desk, but someone pushes me out of the way. It’s Isozaki-sensei.

“Ah! This can’t be happening…! This… This was a rare species that combined the fragrance of the wild and cultivated varieties…” He collapses to his knees by my desk. “...This is terrible.”

“Was that flower kept in this room?”

“Yeah, by the window. Cyclamens love sunlight. I kept it there, on that shelf, every day…”

The cyclamen was pulled out of its pot and stuffed in my desk, along with the cut flowers Isozaki-sensei decorates the room with. There’s dirt and petals scattered under my chair, like blood at a crime scene. Isozaki-sensei picks up the flowers and hugs them close to his chest. Sakurako-san walks in a circle around him, then kneels down next to him, with a strange expression on her face.

“Here… it looks like traces of someone wiping the dirt off the floor.”

Sakurako-san takes out her nitrile gloves and snaps them against her wrists as she puts them on. She traces the floor by the neighbouring desk with her fingertips.

“It’s been wiped up. This soil is like... It seems like it was that cloth over there.”

Isozaki-sensei gives Sakurako-san a dumbfounded look. She reaches for a grey dust cloth that’s caught on the fall-prevention pole by the window. Apparently it’s wet.

“Is this what you normally use to clean the floor?”

“We don’t usually clean it much. Only when something spills or it gets dirty.”

I follow Sakurako-san over to the window, and pick up the cloth. It's definitely still wet, as if it was just used. At this time of year, the heater is always on. The heater has a panel near the window to stop cold air from coming in. Therefore, it would take at least half a day for the cloth to dry. Sakurako-san takes the cloth from me, and enthusiastically looks at the fibres. It's a well used towel, so it's all fluffy and the sides are frayed.

"...Isozaki, what was the soil you used for your cyclamen made of?"

"3 parts rice soil, 3 parts akadama, 3 parts humus, and 1 part perlite…"

Despite the sudden question, Isozaki-sensei answers smoothly while still hugging the flowers. Sakurako-san gently strokes the frayed part of the cloth… then drops grains that are smaller than rice onto her palm.

"Perlite… would that be what these little pebble-like things are?" Sakurako-san shows her palm to Isozaki-sensei.

"Yes… It's a foam made from processing pitch stone and diatomaceous earth at high temperatures. It's important for moisture control. Cyclamens are relatively robust and easy to grow, but proper management of water, temperature, and light are still importa—"

"I see. The offender appears to have wiped up the water and dirt spilled on the floor to some extent. There's traces left."

Even though she's always showing off her extensive knowledge about bones, she ignores Isozaki-sensei's passionate speech about flowers, and patrols around the classroom.

"The one thing I can say is that this crime was committed by someone who wouldn't look out of place hanging around in this classroom. Otherwise people would find it strange to see them wiping up the floor."

"Then it's someone from our class after all…"

"Shoutarou!" As I try to speak, someone yells for me.

"Kougami, and… Imai."

I turn around to see the two of them heading towards me.

"We heard you got cut by a razor, Tatewaki-kun… Are you okay?"

"Did it cut very deep?" Imai grimaces, looking angry. I guess they were both worrying about me.

"...Yeah, well… I needed two stitches."

"Huh…?"

"Are you… Are you really okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was near the joint, so apparently it would take longer to heal on its own. If it wasn't my thumb, just taping it would have been fine." However, the two of them don't look satisfied with that answer.

"That's not fine at all," Kougami says, looking like she's about to cry. "But… How did you even get cut in the first place?"

As expected of Sakurako-san's favourite student. She knows just what to ask.

"Oh, well… It was…"

I can't get the words out. I can't say it in front of Imai like this. He may or may not be the one responsible for it. No, he couldn't be, but he's still the one who gave me the bread. If he did it, he wouldn't be worried about me like this. To my surprise, it's Sakurako-san who helps me.

"The boy named Imai… Are you the one who hurt your arm?"

“Huh…? Yeah, I am.”

Imai looks confused for a moment over the sudden change of topic, then nods. Sakurako-san walks up to him, then grabs his middle finger on his right hand.

“Are you right handed?”

Imai nods again.

“I see. Then extend your elbow and push my hand back.”

Other than Isozaki-sensei, who is off in his own little world, everyone stares at Sakurako-san in confusion. Especially Kougami. Imai makes eye contact with me, looking at me for answers about what he should do. I don’t have any clue. But this is Sakurako-san we’re talking about, she must know something. I nod at him, so he obeys Sakurako-san, despite looking confused. However, his expression immediately distorts in pain.

“Does it hurt? I see… That was the middle finger extension test. Imai, you have lateral epicondylitis, don’t you?”

Imai nods.

“Lateral…?”

“Tennis elbow,” Kougami says, since I’m apparently the only one who doesn’t know what that means.

“Tennis elbow?”

“Yeah. It’s usually called tennis elbow. To people who play tennis, it’s a familiar name. It’s pain originating from the extensor carpi radialis brevis muscle, which usually causes pain in the elbow. It causes pain when a person grabs something. For example, a cloth. It would hurt to squeeze a cloth,” Sakurako-san says, looking at the cloth by the window. “So… Boy. Your thinking wasn’t wrong. At least, he wasn’t the one who murdered Isozaki’s flower.”

Sakurako-san beckons Kougami and Imai closer, then whispers something to them.

“Huh?” Kougami yells in surprise.

Imai’s face turns bright red in an instant.

“Could you, please?” Sakurako-san asks Imai.

“...Yes.” He nods, though his face is still beet red.

“Huh? Both of them...?”

“By the way, that brownie… It wasn’t too sweet. It was really good.” Imai says in a shy voice to Kougami, as they start walking.

“Really? I’m glad you ate it! You seem particularly worried about your body, so I was worried it would have too many calories…”

The two of them walk out of the classroom. I look to Sakurako-san, wondering what just happened. She grins and winks at me.

“That’s it. Let’s head home for today. Isozaki, you’re coming, too.”

“Ah… My Ermengarde…”

“Isozaki!”

Even though large tears are still rolling down his cheeks, he’s forced to stand up.

“I want to take Shoutarou home. However, I’m not in a position where I can meet with his mother. I’ll find the murderer of that flower properly,” Sakurako-san says with a sharp voice. Isozaki-sensei’s hands are shaking.

He mutters “it’s a promise” with a sulky expression, then puts the cyclamen back in its pot in the corner of the room.

“Won’t it be okay if you just water it?”

“I can’t… the bulbs were crushed. Cyclamen in particular are prone to getting sick when the bulbs are damaged.”

I guess it’s no use then. It makes me feel guilty too when I hear him talk in such a bitter voice. Would it have been better to tell the teachers sooner? Or could this be retaliation for relying on a teacher? Still, I'm relieved to have reason to believe that Imai isn’t the perpetrator. At least, he wouldn’t have been able to squeeze the towel, and Kougami was giving him Valentine’s Day chocolate. They seemed to be getting along well with each other. It feels like the heavy fog of anxiety in my chest has finally been lifted. After all, it wasn’t Imai that did it.

“...It’s strange,” Isozaki-sensei suddenly mumbles.

“What is it this time, Isozaki?”

“The razor. Why did Kougami and Imai know about it? Kuma-san definitely—?!” (Note: Kuma-san is just a nickname for the nurse, Higuruma. It’s written the same way.)

Sakurako-san cuts him off by covering his mouth.

“It’s fine, let’s just go,” Sakurako-san says, putting her index finger to her lips. She’s telling him not to say anything.

“...”

With that, Sakurako-san leaves the classroom. We don’t know where she’s going, so we have no choice but to follow her.

Before taking me home, Isozaki-sensei calls my mom to let her know what happened.

“Sorry, sir.”

“I got to miss a boring staff meeting because of it, so it was kind of lucky for me.”

There’s absolutely nothing lucky about this situation for him, though.

“So, what exactly happened?” I ask Sakurako-san, as I climb out of my seat.

“I thought there might be a listening device in the classroom.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it. Well, I’m not really doing much. So for now, I’m leaving Yuriko to Imai. I don’t want to let Yuriko go home alone today. Fortunately, that boy called Imai obeyed without asking any questions. They’re good kids, aren’t they? Now then, Isozaki. That thing from earlier.”

“Oh, the thing with the razor.”

Somehow I feel a little proud that Sakurako-san praised Imai. However, Isozaki-sensei, who is beside me, has a very serious expression. He has his arms crossed, and is tapping his index finger against his elbow.

“Only Shoutarou, me, and Higuruma-sensei from the school infirmary should have known that he cut his finger on a razor. I only told the other teachers that Shoutarou cut his finger. I don’t think Kuma-san would have told other people about it, though.”

“So basically, you’re trying to say that the person who leaked the information is the one who placed the razor?”

“It’s our best bet,” Isozaki-sensei says quietly.

“It should be simple, then. We can just check with Kougami or Imai to ask who told them. That’ll at least give us an idea.” Sakurako-san smiles slightly while adjusting the rear view mirror.

“Huh?”

“But this is probably something best done carefully. Well, it’s fine. I don’t hate doing things carefully.” Sakurako-san’s smirk is completely different from Isozaki-sensei’s grumpy expression.

“...Well I hate it. All of this is a huge pain.” Isozaki-sensei lets out a huge sigh.

I stay silent, since I don’t feel like participating in their conversation. I really should have told them what was happening sooner. Once the anesthesia wears off on my thumb, and it starts hurting, I really regret it.

Part 8

Two days after Valentine’s Day, I go to my usual coffee shop after school. I get there a little bit before I promised to meet him.

“Wh… What is this?”

As soon as he enters the store and sees us, his expression stiffens. Sakurako-san gives him a composed smile, and gestures for him to sit with us.

“You look like you don’t know why we called you here. Well, just sit. I like this shop, and as you know, Kougami does too. I don’t want to cause any trouble here… It would be a shame if Kougami couldn’t come here anymore… Hisamichi Sedoya.”

Sedoya-sensei turns away. Is he going to try to run away by saying he isn’t involved in this?

“Should I say it’s not to meet you? No, I shouldn’t. You should already know me, after all. I’m often with Yuriko, after all.”

“Um… Please wait a second. Isozaki-sensei, Higuruma-sensei, what is all of this?” Sedoya-sensei asks in a quiet voice, while he adjusts his glasses.

Higuruma-sensei doesn’t reply. Instead, he just urges Sedoya-sensei to sit down. Rather than being an attendee here, he’s more like a bodyguard. Sedoya-sensei reluctantly sits in the chair.

“My apologies, but what were you expecting? You shouldn’t have written Yuriko Kougami as the sender for the letter hidden in your bag.”

“...”

“You copied her handwriting, the scent of her hand cream, used stationary with a character she likes on it, and even set the designated meeting spot to her favourite tea shop.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I also asked Yuriko Kougami. She said that sometimes notes she’s been exchanging with her friends, or her handkerchiefs go missing. Nobody can speak well of what you’ve done.”

Sedoya-sensei smiles behind his glasses. “Those things… on what foundation are you accusing me?

“There’s many reasons. First of all, the culprit had to be someone who could get in and out of Shoutarou’s classroom without feeling out of place. Especially since the flowers were overkill. There aren’t many people who could be wiping the classroom floor and not have the students think it’s strange, right?”

“That’s… completely subjective.” Sedoya-sensei calmly replies, though his upper lip twitches maliciously.

“Only a teacher could get away at a moment’s notice while touching a student’s belongings. Since you’re the assistant homeroom teacher, you would be able to get away with touching a student’s bag by saying you were adjusting the positions of the desks. Besides… Yuriko was giving brownies to several people that day. One of the reasons you stuck so close to Shoutarou even though there’s so many other students in the class is probably because he’s easy for you to keep an eye on. Well, if you want to say that there’s no physical evidence, I could just send the police right to your house.”

“Wha…!”

“I could notify the police, or contact the school. Either way, once this comes to light, your social standing will be in shambles. Shoutarou was also injured. Injuring someone is a splendid crime. I’m prepared to sue you.”

Sedoya-sensei suddenly stands up. His chair screeches. Fortunately, we’re the only ones in the store. However, this place is important to me, so I don’t want to disgrace it by making so much noise.

“Th-the police won’t move that quickly!” Sedoya-sensei shouts.

“Isn’t there quite a lot for you to move? All the things you don’t want seen? I’m sure there’s lots of evidence in your house. For better or for worse, I have a lot of acquaintances within the police. I can get the police to your house right away. You can be destroyed with a single phone call.”

“Wh…”

“Your parents in Sapporo in particular. Both your parents are teachers… If word gets out that you were stalking a student, and injured another student, their reputations won’t stand a chance.”

The blood immediately drains from Sedoya-sensei’s face. He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out.

“...Are you trying to threaten me?”

“Yes, I am.”

Sedoya-sensei slumps in his chair. I don’t think he has the energy to stand. He bites into his left thumb, with his head slumped down. I can hear a solid clacking sound.

“...A habit of biting one’s nails is often associated with anxiety and stress,” Sakurako-san says in a low, stifled voice.

“I’m…”

“It’s quite unsanitary. It looks like it’s only your left thumb… That nail looks wider than your other nails. It must be trying to grow to the sides, since it can’t grow straight. Since the nail itself is deformed, you must have been biting it since you were a child.”

Sakurako-san stops to let out a long sigh.

"...You must be unhappy with something."

Her voice is gentle. Low and sweet. She softly takes his left hand in her own.

"Still, your coping method is, unfortunately, corrupt." She leans in close to his ear, and speaks in a cold, angry tone.

Sedoya-sensei's whole body shivers.

"Do you understand me? You are to completely disappear from our lives. You will never interact with Kougami, or any of the rest of us, ever again. If I ever notice you meddling with any of us again, I will destroy your social life."

"I can't… Do you want me to quit my job, too?"

"That's no problem. You're under no obligation to comply with me. You don't even need to send in a letter of resignation, we'll go to the school ourselves. If you're going to lose your job anyway, wouldn't quitting be the best option for you?"

That's obviously a threat. Sedoya-sensei raises his head, and glares at Sakurako-san. Rather than feeling intimidated, she tries to stifle a laugh.

"Look at that disappointed face. There's no helping it, you've already done way too much. You're also a terrible actor," Sakurako-san says, laughing.

Sedoya-sensei looks astonished. His hands tremble.

"I already know everything about you. I know where you live, the colour of your curtains… What time you get up in the morning, what you're doing, where you're going… What you eat, what you buy, what time you go to sleep at… If you don't believe me, ask me a question. I'll answer anything. Oh, that's right, you had a daikon salad for lunch yesterday, but you didn't have carrots with it since you don't like them."

"No way…" Sedoya-sensei sounds choked.

"What are you so surprised about? Think about it for a minute - If I can find out all of this information so easily, it's best if you just make yourself scarce."

Sakurako-san tries to pull on Sedoya-sensei's hand. Of course, he pulls back, but Higuruma-sensei forces him to raise his arm and stand up. The moment he stands, Isozaki-sensei pulls away his chair. He doesn't notice, and falls when he tries to sit back down. He crawls up off the ground, and leaves the shop.

How unsightly. Somehow, I still pity him. Of course I don't like him, but what he said to me in the classroom before still stuck with me. Does he feel the same way? Or was he just making things up…?

"Sakurako-san…"

I hate how he injured me to the point of needing stitches. Still, this feels like it was too much. It gives me a pained feeling in my chest, like seeing someone getting bullied.

"Don't worry about it. Actually, if I'd reported him to the police, I don't know how much they could have done. He's still young. It's best to stop this deviant behaviour early. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and fear for fear."

"But… Isn't what you did a bad thing, too?"

"It can't be helped. The punishment one deserves doesn't always line up with what society expects. He isn't the kind of person you should care about. Only a dictator thinks

everyone in the world could understand each other," Sakurako-san says, shrugging her shoulders.

Isozaki-sensei and Higuruma-sensei don't have anything to say.

Does spite only breed more spite? The incident has been resolved, but I don't feel relieved at all.

Part 9

After that, Sedoya-sensei took a few days off, then resigned. The reason given was poor physical health. My harassment stopped at the same time. I decide to take this opportunity to confess to Imai that Kougami and I are close, and often have tea together. He's grumpy about it for a bit, but ends up being grateful when he gets to eat Kougami's homemade lunch twice a week, as well. The three of us decide to see a movie together. I've completely regained my peaceful life. Or so I thought.

On the morning of the day that we're going to the movie, I notice my mom outside, cleaning the entranceway. She says "geez, I'm fed up with this!" I freeze.

"Wh… What's wrong, mom?"

"For some reason, there's always dead animals in front of the house lately. Do you think this is some kind of harassment or something? Should I call the police?"

I feel a chill run up my spine. I also cleaned up a dead mouse before. I thought it was just a one-off thing, but apparently not.

"...What do you mean 'always'? It's happened multiple times?"

"Yeah, it's been about 3 weeks now. Every few days. Geez, it's so creepy, I can't stand it."

For a moment, the image of Sedoya-sensei's face passes through my mind. But that can't be. Probably. But if it's not him, who could be doing this? My vision goes dark.

What if he wasn't the only one doing the harassing?

I didn't check to make sure he did each and every thing. However, I never thought that other people might be involved. Hanabusa's name flashes through my mind. That wicked, mysterious person who can skillfully ruin your everyday life. What if Wolf was also part of Hanabusa's plan? Thoughts like that cause anxiety to build up within me.

I wrap up the corpse of the wild pigeon in some newspaper, and rush to Sakurako-san's house. Looks like I'll have to cancel my plans to go to the movie. At least Imai and Kougami will have a chance to deepen their relationship.

I get in touch with Sakurako-san on my way. When I get there, I immediately notice the stench of death. Hector is excitedly running around the house, but gran scolds him.

"Is this it?"

"Yeah…"

I spread the bundle of newspapers out on the dining table.

Gran looks disgusted, and shouts, "take that outside!"

Sakurako-san chooses to disobey her this time. She takes out a lupe and examines the bird.

“An oriental turtle dove… It appears to have a broken neck.”

“Do you think that’s how it died?”

I feel bad for the poor thing.

“I don’t know. There’s also a wound all the way down to the bone on its chest. It must have been stabbed.” Sakurako-san silently stares at the dove for a while.

“Can you figure out anything else?”

“Let me think… Were there any footprints in the snow?”

“I don’t know. There’s heated roads in front of my house.”

“I see…”

My mom hates shoveling snow, so she had it remodelled last year.

“Hm… I think this wound looks like it came from being attacked by a large animal.”

“Really?”

“I can’t deny the possibility that it was done by a human, but… This spot here looks like it’s from a tooth. It looks like it was from a dog, doesn’t it?”

“...A dog?”

Hector pushes his nose into my hand. He gently nuzzles my cut finger with his nose, like he’s trying to make it better. He huffs at me, like he’s demanding I pet him. I stick my uninjured hand into his cotton candy-like fur. He has such a thick winter coat that I can’t even tell where the fur ends.

“A dog, huh… Do you think it was a large breed?”

“Probably. The cut looks like it was from a dog around the same size as Hector, or maybe slightly larger… Why do you ask?”

“No reason…”

I give Hector a big hug. He really smells like an animal. Somehow, I feel like I already know who the culprit of this grotesque prank is. I leave the dove with Sakurako-san, and head home. On my way, I stop by the pet shop and buy a big bag of pig’s ears.

“Wolf.”

When I get home, I call for the stray dog in my yard. I felt like maybe she’d suddenly appear, acting like she didn’t miss me at all.

“Wolf, come here. Let’s play together.”

I call out into the empty yard, with no response.

“Wolf…”

No matter how many times I call for her, she doesn’t show up. While I stand there, I hear an ambulance nearby. Every time I hear that siren, it reminds me of the sound of a wolf howling. I can’t bring myself to head inside for a while. While I wait, I almost feel like I can hear her lonely howl from the distance.

The next morning, the pig’s ear that I left out is gone, with a dead crow next to it. It almost seems like a thank you present. I’m sure the animal corpses weren’t someone harassing

me, but Wolf trying to thank me. Rather than this, I'd rather her thank me by letting me pet her fluffy neck. I just want to hug her.

Do we live in different worlds? I wonder if we'll just never be able to understand each other. I thought that if I loved her enough, and treated her kindly, I'd eventually be able to shorten the distance between us. The world is sharper, more square than I thought. I learned that in the winter of my first year of high school.

Second Bone: Asahi Bridge Irregulars

(This chapter is from Kougami's perspective, but it's clearer in Japanese than English so I'm just letting you know)

Asahibashi is one of the representative bridges of Asahikawa, a river town. Asahikawa PR brochures call Asahibashi a symbol of the city, and one of Hokkaido's heritage sites. It's a beautiful, arch-shaped bridge. The bridge, as well as the view of the mountain ridgeline that surrounds Asahikawa from it, are both gorgeous. One of my grandpas paints as a hobby, and often uses it as a theme. Even though I don't know much about architecture, I still think it's splendid. However, my grandma says that it's also a bridge of farewells. Apparently all the soldiers used this bridge when they were leaving for the war. One particular gloomy day on that bridge still holds such sad memories for me.

It's the first Friday of February. Today is the first day of the Asahikawa Winter Festival, the biggest winter event in the city. Fireworks are going to start at 7:00pm. I've always loved fireworks, especially on the cold days of winter. They're so transient, disappearing in an instant, leaving just an afterglow. However, I think the most important part of events like these are the people you go with. My friends all found significant others over Christmas and winter break, so out of the five of us here, I'm the only one without a partner.

I envy people with a partner. They must be happy, walking while holding hands with the person they love. There was a boy I dated for about a week during summer, but things didn't go well. After all, I value my family, friends, and freedom more than spending time with a boyfriend. Sometimes I get lonely and think it might be nice to have a boyfriend, but I want to become a cool woman on my own, like Sakurako-san. I want to be a person who can protect others, rather than someone to be protected.

"Kougami, isn't there a guy you like?" Toma-kun, my friend Mana's boyfriend, asks me.

I think Mana only likes him for his looks. He's tall, he has a big nose, and he plays baseball.

"It's because Yuri is so serious," Mana says to Toma-kun in an astonished voice.

Mana had been trying to find a boyfriend for me, but when she realized I wasn't interested, she gave up and stopped.

"I'm not really interested in that stuff…"

"I know, right? You're so cute, I'm sure you've got high standards," Ken-kun, who is Chika's boyfriend, says.

Chika makes a pouty expression. I wish she'd stop, I didn't even do anything.

"I don't really… Understand boyfriends and all that stuff. I don't feel like I need one right now."

I'm tired of explaining this all the time. I don't understand why people won't just accept my answer as it is. The others all move to another point of interest.

Mana and Toma-kun look at the snow sculptures from on the bridge. Chika and Ken-kun are holding hands with each other. I'm fine on my own. I'm wearing gloves, so I don't need someone else to warm up my hands for me. I also brought a pocket warmer. The only part that I'm unhappy with is that other people feel sorry for me.

“Huh? But didn’t you eat ice cream with Tatewaki at the supermarket during winter break?” Ken-kun suddenly says to me.

“Huh?”

“Tatewaki is a pretty nice guy.” Toma-kun nods.

When did they see that? The two of us drink tea together all the time.

“So? I don’t think he’s Yuri’s type. Imai-kun is trying way too hard, it’s kinda lame. You guys are both in the tennis club, right?”

“Yeah…”

Not my type? What kind of person do they think would suit me in the first place? Mana mentioned Imai-kun… I do talk to him sometimes, and I don’t think he’s a bad guy, but… It’s kinda scary because I never know what he’s thinking. I never know what to say, and I can’t tell if he’s interested in what I’m talking about.

“Oh yeah, I saw you giving Imai-kun something on Valentine’s Day. Yuri made brownies, they were really good.”

“Brownies?”

I don't understand what Mana’s hinting at for a moment. I only gave him a present as thanks for always helping me in the club. I’d already made some for Tatewaki-kun and Sakurako-san, so I had plenty of extra.

“Imai-kun doesn’t seem interested in girls, though,” Chika says casually.

I nod.

“You think so?” Mana asks, trying not to stay on the subject too long.

Chika confessed to Imai-kun last year, and got completely rejected.

“But you should stop hanging out with Tatewaki-kun, Yuri.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I heard that… recently he’s been involved in some kind of trouble. Apparently he’s actually dating someone who does bad stuff. I don’t really believe it since he doesn’t look like the type of person and he’s pretty nice, though,” Chika says in an unusually sweet voice. It’s probably because she’s in front of her boyfriend.

“But during winter vacation they said he was hospitalized because of a traffic accident, but I heard he was actually stabbed. That’s why he was in a private room at the hospital. Apparently police officers showed up. My friend who was hospitalized told me so. You really can’t judge a book by its cover, huh?”

“Wow, that’s surprising. I wonder what he did?” Toma-kun says, sounding astonished.

Mana clings to his arm. “Ah, but I also heard that he picks up dead animals. A girl saw him while on a drive to Biei!”

“That… Isn’t that normally a crime?”

“Uwah,” Chika says, and shivers.

“That’s…” I’m at a loss for words.

Besides, that’s not something Tatewaki-kun would do on his own, he was probably helping Sakurako-san.

“...Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I'm kind of in a bad mood now, so I decide to just stay silent for a little while. I know that Tatewaki-kun isn't that kind of person, but I don't think I could explain it to Mana and the others. After all, I'd have to tell them about Sakurako-san. They definitely wouldn't understand her.

But I hate myself for not being able to say anything. I feel bad for Tatewaki-kun. Besides, Mana and the others probably don't even care about what I'm worrying about. The four of them are each in their own little worlds in their pairs, clinging all over each other, giggling, and pressing their faces together while they talk. I truly, from the bottom of my heart, regret coming here with the four of them. But in the future, these kinds of things will happen more and more, even if I don't have a boyfriend. They haven't really done anything wrong, I just don't want to be like them. However, I feel a bit left out and anxious, like I'm going to be left behind.

"...Ah."

I look at the winter festival from the bridge for a while, until I suddenly notice that the Mana and the others are gone.

"..."

I'll just try calling them. I pull out my phone and find Mana's number in my call history. I'm about to press the call button, but decide not to.

"...Well, it'll be fine."

It's the same for me whether I'm together with them or not. I don't need them. I consider calling Tatewaki-kun for a minute, but he's probably with Sakurako-san. I give up on waiting for the other four and walk along the bridge on my own. From on the bridge, I can see the constant flow of people walking around the festival. I felt alone even when I was with the others, so being alone now doesn't seem too bad. At least I'm not frustrated by the smiles and laughter of the people I pass by. I walk by a child holding hands and walking with her grandma, reminding me of when I used to go to the festival with my grandparents.

Well, whatever. All I can feel while seeing all the people enjoying themselves is "whatever." Just "whatever," like when I'm bored.

"..."

I make my way through the crowd of people, and eventually notice a lone woman leaning over the guardrail on the bridge. She's staring down at the river. Her black hair is fluttering around in the wind. She's wearing a black down coat. She's like a black hole in this world covered in snow. I quickly realize that it's not just because of the colour she's wearing. It's her expression. Among all the smiling, happy people, she looks sad and angry, like she's about to cry. I wonder… What is she upset about?

She suddenly throws something into the air. Toward the river. At the exact same moment, a strong gust of wind blows into the crowd. It makes me feel like I'm suffocating for a moment. I cough. I must have accidentally inhaled some snow. There's no way to protect yourself from the wind up on the bridge, unless you're in the crowd of people. Since I'm standing on my own off to the side, I have no choice but to hold onto the guardrail. The woman in the black coat also clings to the handrail. She leans forward, looking down at the river as if she's looking for something. Soon, she suddenly backs away, and continues walking. It seems like she's given up.

She seemed so enthusiastic, so I quicken my pace and head toward where she was standing. But of course, even when I look down in the same spot, I don't see anything special.

It's just the dark, swelling river, snow sculptures, and people passing by through the winter market. Or so I thought.

Rustle.

Something touches my toes.

"...A letter?"

At first I think it's just garbage, or a pamphlet from the festival. When my gaze drops to my feet, I see a white envelope stuck to the guardrail. I gently pick it up. There's something inside that moves when I shake the envelope. It's sealed. I turn it over, but there's no name or address on it. It's a completely blank envelope.

"..."

I look around, but I can't find the woman. Would it be rude to open it and look inside? I hesitate. However, at this rate, I'll never find out who it belongs to. The sender was probably the woman from earlier. If she was looking for this letter, I'd like to get it back to her if I can. After a lot of worrying, I decide to open it.

When I look inside, I see a single sheet of paper. That, and a ring. The ring is a woman's size. It's silver in colour, probably made of platinum, with a slightly yellow, translucent gem in the middle. Did she really try to throw something like this off a bridge? Maybe the envelope just slipped out of her hand. After all, this ring definitely doesn't look cheap. In that case, she must be worried… If I open the letter, maybe it'll have a phone number or email address that could lead me to the woman in the black coat. In an instant I'm shocked, and a sharp pain runs through my chest.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving for someone else. Please forgive me."

"Wh… this… is this a suicide note?"

My hand holding the ring trembles. It's not because of the cold.

"What should I do…?"

I run to the other side of the bridge and look around. Sure enough, there's no sign of the woman from before. What should I do, what should I do, what should I do… That thought keeps repeating in my head while I search for her. If I don't find her soon, something bad might happen. I can't help feeling impatient, but I can't rush too much. I push the envelope into my pocket, so I don't lose it. My finger bumps my phone in my pocket.

"...That's right, I have Sakurako-san."

I take my phone out. Maybe she can find the woman just from what it says in the letter, or something. She's like Sherlock Holmes, after all.

"Geez! Why is he never there when it matters?!"

I call Tatewaki-kun, but he doesn't pick up. I don't know Sakurako-san's home phone number, and she doesn't own a cell phone. I can't contact her unless I go through Tatewaki-kun or visit her house. I call two more times. I have no other choice but to try sending him an email.

"Once you see this, contact me immediately!"

I suddenly feel much more anxious now that I can't get a hold of him. I have to do this on my own.

“Oh, that’s right. The information desk…”

I wonder if they can announce that someone found a suicide note the same way they do with lost items or lost kids? I’m trying to rack my brain for any possible ideas, then finally decide on going to the information centre. I wonder where it is? I check the festival website for a map. Even though there’s so many people, I’m too busy on my phone to notice, and end up bumping into someone.

“Oh, sorry!”

This person smells sweet, like flowers, but they seem to have a solid build. I immediately realize that they’re a boy, so I quickly apologize and step back.

“It’s dangerous to walk around while looking at your phone, Kougami.”

“Huh?”

I half heartedly apologize without lifting my face from the screen until I register that he called my name.

“Huh…? Isozaki… sensei?”

I look up and make eye contact with the man in front of me wearing a knit hat, mask, muffler, and duffle coat. I wonder for a moment who it is, until I recognize his voice and silky bangs. It’s Isozaki-sensei, the biology teacher. He’s Tatewaki-kun’s homeroom teacher, and he’s on good terms with Sakurako-san. A while ago we both went to a party at Sakurako-san’s house.

“Uh, umm, what was it again? Hanako-chan? Ranko-chan?” (TL note: Hana=flower, Ran=orchid, since “Yuri” in her first name means lily)

A man with fluffy hair that rustles as he shakes his head and points at me.

“It’s Yuriko.”

It’s another person I met at that party. Let’s see, I think he was a police officer… Oh yeah, it’s Utsumi-san.

“What are you two doing?”

I’m more interested in why these two are hanging out together than what they’re doing, though.

“He suddenly invited me,” Isozaki-sensei says with a disappointed expression.

“Wellll, his girlfriend dumped him the other day, so I felt bad for him.” Utsumi-san says, laughing.

“You got dumped?” I ask, pointing at Isozaki-sensei. He points at Ustumi-san.

Looks like he was talking about himself.

Yeah, well she hasn’t contacted me in about 3 months, so I just thought it was about time to move on.”

3 months… isn’t that the kind of thing you’d end after one month? I keep those thoughts to myself and just say, “I see” while laughing.

“Even though I’m in such a sorry state, Icchan said he didn’t want to go with me. In exchange I have to go take him to see some awful movie in Sapporo during the next vacation.”

“A movie? What kind?”

“It’s only playing in a single building, so I can’t see it in Asahikawa. It’s a story about the life of a German gardener.” Isozaki-sensei replies.

His car is small, so it’s hard for him to drive to Sapporo in the winter.

“Now then… Kougami? Are you alone?” Isozaki-sensei asks me, sounding worried.

“No. I was with Mana and the others, but we kind of got separated…”

“If you’re lonely, why don’t you go with us? I‘m lonely, and I have free time, so I invited Icchan. I miss my girlfriend, but it’s easier when I’m with friends.”

“We’re not friends, though.” Isozaki-sensei mutters.

“What?! Even though we send so many emails to each other?!”

“You keep sending them, so I have no choice but to answer.”

“Then maybe you should try sending some, too!”

Isozaki-sensei sighs while Utsumi-san clings to him. I have no idea if they’re on good or bad terms with each other. It’s kind of amusing seeing Isozaki-sensei looking troubled, since he usually looks so calm and composed. But right now, I don’t have time to have to make small talk.

“Um… I’m sorry but I’m kind of in a hurry.”

“Huh? Oh, right, you were looking for your friends. Want us to help look?”

“No thanks…”

I refuse without thinking. It might actually be better if I have their help.

“Um, sensei?”

“Yeah?”

“I… Just picked this up.”

“What is it?”

I hand him the white envelope. “A woman left it on the bridge. A gust of wind blew it towards me.”

When he reads the letter, his expression becomes grim.

“Is this… a suicide note?” Utsumi-san says in surprise.

“And… This was in it, too.”

I take the ring out of my pocket and hand it to them. I fill them in on everything that happened with the woman earlier.

“An engagement ring… maybe?”

“Cool! This is a diamond, right?”

I guess it’s a diamond after all… I’d been wondering if that’s what it was.

“...Utsumi-kun, do you have an oil based pen?” Isozaki-sensei asks in slightly a sullen voice.

“An oil based pen? Are ballpoint pens oil based?”

“You carry one around?”

He’s so prepared.

“Well, I need it sometimes. I have a stamp, too.”

“A stamp?”

“I use stamps a lot for work. While working, a police officer should always keep one in their pocket. When I make a record I have to fold the page in half and stamp the bottom to prove that it wasn’t changed later. I also use the stamp other times, like…”

“It’s fine! I just need an oil based pen!” Isozaki-sensei shouts at Utsumi-san, who seems to be unable to stop talking once he’s started.

“So then, why an oil based pen?” Utsumi-san asks as he hurriedly takes the ballpoint pen out of his chest pocket.

Isozaki-sensei pokes the gem on the ring with the pen while wearing his leather gloves.

“Diamonds… Oil adheres to them easily, so oil based ink leaves a mark. They also get dull from being touched because of the oil on your hands. The opposite is true for zirconia.”

“Woah, you’re like a science teacher, Icchan!”

Utsumi-san’s words of praise(?) go completely ignored.

“It’s not cloudy… it looks like a diamond, but it’s synthetic.”

“A synthetic diamond… is that different from zirconia?”

“Zirconia is oxidized zirconium that’s used to make fake diamonds. Synthetic diamonds are made by heat treating carbon, so the properties are completely different between the two.”

I didn’t know they were so different. I nod, and look at Isozaki-sensei’s hand.

“Do the artificial and natural ones look any different?”

“I don’t know. There might be, but I don’t know enough about them. But usually, someone wouldn’t throw away a real diamond. They’re not cheap at this size.” Isozaki-sensei says while looking at the ring from different angles. “Was the person young?”

“Ah, I don’t know. But… I think she was about the same age as you, Isozaki-sensei.”

It was around half an hour ago. I don’t think she was that old, though.

“A date from 3 years ago… and… K.H Main dans la main tout le temps… it’s French. Is the date a wedding anniversary?”

“Only three years of marriage… I wonder if it has something to do with the person addressed in the note?” Utsumi-san frowns.

“Well… If I were to make a guess, I’d assume that this woman’s partner died before her, and she couldn’t stand it anymore and decided to follow them… Or something like that.”

Utsumi-san grumbles about how he doesn’t think it’s such a generic story. Somehow, I agree with him.

“What other reason would someone have to throw this letter off the bridge?” I ask.

“Maybe she was going to jump into Ishikari river, but decided to go somewhere else since there were too many people?”

“In that case, why would she throw the letter here? ...Unless she wasn’t actually planning on jumping.”

But… She was all by herself when she threw the letter. Isozaki-sensei quietly thinks for a while, without adding anything to the conversation.

“Icchan?”

“This part that says ‘Main dans la main tout le temps’... It means ‘hand in hand forever’ in French, I think.”

“Forever…”

“...”

Utsumi-san and I glance at each other. And she threw such a special ring off the bridge…

“Well… Maybe we should just leave it like this.”

“But she looked so sad and pained… That’s why I was watching her in the first place. Everyone else seemed to be having fun, except for her.” I say, looking around at the crowds of people.

“Well there are people like that, right? We should probably get going soon. It’s too cold to just stand here.”

Utsumi-san seems to be just as worried as I am, but Isozaki-sensei loses interest in the ring. He puts it back in my palm. He adjusts his scarf, then turns around to walk away.

“Hey, hey, hey! Icchan!”

“Are you really going to leave it like this?!”

He seems just as surprised as we are.

“But… If the owner of the ring wanted to throw it away, isn’t it fine to just let her do what she wants?”

“That’s just what you want to do, Icchan. What if we leave her alone and she ends up dying?”

“You’re free to do what you want. You don’t need me there.”

“Do what we want? Itsuki-san, do you really think that? You can’t just decide that you don’t feel like saving a person’s life!”

“U-umm, you guys…” I become flustered when they start to argue.

Sensei is looking at both of us with such a cold expression.

“First of all, we should look for her! Can you describe what she looked like? Or draw a picture?” Utsumi-san says, despite Isozaki-sensei’s protests.

“Draw?”

“Hold on, I have a notepad somewhere…” Utsumi-san says, as he starts searching through his pockets.

Sensei sighs and takes out his phone. He opens up the simple drawing app it came with.

“Oh, I see. That’s pretty handy.”

Utsumi-san takes the phone and hands it to me… I have to draw a picture?

“Uhh, well, she had a black coat, and long hair…”

I have no choice but to try to draw something. When I show them, both Utsumi-san and Isozaki-sensei are completely silent.

“....Are you…?”

“Am I what?”

“Yuri-chan, are you joking?”

“...No, I’m not.” I shake my head.

I’m full of regret. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m absolutely horrible at drawing. I’m more than aware of it. Whenever I tried to draw a cat, people would ask, “is that a horse?” The honesty of that question is the more traumatic part.

“Darn, I’m not good at drawing, either.” Utsumi-san says.

“Did she have any other distinguishing features? Was there a celebrity she looked like?” Sensei asks me, giving up hope in my drawing abilities.

“Oh! She looked like, uhh, that one actor. The rock ‘n roll singer!”

With sensei’s help, I’m able to explain to them what she looked like. However, since I didn’t see her face for very long, and I was pretty far away, I don’t remember any details.

“Well, let’s search based off this for now,” Utsumi-san says encouragingly.

Isozaki-sensei gives a truly annoyed sigh, and mutters about how he has no choice. In the end, he crumples his face and turns around.

However, even if we say we're going to search for her, it isn't really that easy. We start checking people with long dark hair that are wearing a black coat. There's countless people that match that description on the festival grounds. Soon, my heart feels like it's going to break.

"We can't find her," Utsumi-san says, crestfallen. Isozaki-sensei agrees, saying it's only natural.

This time, Ustumi-san ignores Isozaki-sensei. I really can't tell if they get along or not.

"Are you two seriously still planning to look for her?" Isozaki-sensei asks, sounding fed up.

He's been wanting to get something to eat at the market for a while now.

"Sorry, just a little more…" I reply, and look at Ustumi-san for agreement, but he isn't next to me anymore.

"Utsumi-san?"

Huh? I look around.

"Ah…"

I see him walking over to a boy who's standing still on the other side of the path.

"What's wrong, kid? Did you get separated from your mom?" He calls out to the boy.

He's wearing a black sweater and a hat with a character from a popular youkai anime on it. The child's cheeks are red, and he looks like he's about to cry.

"It'll be okay. I'm actually a police officer. Officer Utsumi, at your service!" He salutes the boy.

Unfortunately, the boy looks like he's getting closer to the verge of tears.

"Ahh, don't cry, don't cry! You're gonna be fine, right? Who'd you come with, your mom? Don't worry, I'll make sure I find her."

"Ah…"

I notice the boy's pants turn wet down his legs.

"Oh…? Ah… I see… You didn't make it in time… It's fine, it's fine, you couldn't help it. I'm an adult and a police officer, but it happens to me sometimes, too. You'll catch a cold out here, so come to the missing kids centre with me, okay?"

Utsumi-san is really showering this kid with questions. Somehow it feels kind and gentle, rather than seeming intimidating.

"Sorry, Yuri-chan! I'm gonna go take care of this kid, so I'll meet up with you guys again later!"

"Uh, sure!"

He says with a salute, so I salute him back. He holds onto the boy's hand and disappears into the crowd. I look back at Isozaki-sensei to see him huddled up on the side of the path. He must be cold.

"Oh…"

Before I can walk over to him, I get an email. I expected it to be from Tatewaki-kun, but it's actually from Mana. It says, "I can't find Chika and Toma" with a crying emoji. I pretend like I didn't notice the email. Right now, the woman in the black coat is more important.

I try calling Tatewaki-kun again, but once again, he doesn't pick up. He's definitely with Sakurako-san. I 100% guarantee it. It's so unfair. Shoutarou Tatewaki, you stupid meanie. I'm never going halfsies on a chiffon cake with you again.

"Sorry, sensei."

I give up and put my phone back in my pocket, and head back to where Isozaki-sensei has been waiting for me. However, he shakes his head.

“It’s fine, but… Haven’t we done enough?”

“Enough…”

“Do you really think we can track down someone in this crowd when we don’t know their name, and hardly remember their face?”

My chest throbs.

“But I’m sure if I saw her face, I’d-“

“I’m sure the parents of that boy just now are desperate to find him. Even so, they wouldn’t be able to find him themselves. Even though they’re his parents. And yet, you think we can find someone we don’t even know?” Isozaki-sensei mutters in a cold, calm voice.

“But!”

“Besides… you don’t have to feel responsible, Kougami. It can’t be helped if we can’t find her like this, it’s only natural. Even if she doesn’t return home, it’s not your fault. It’s her own problem.”

Isozaki-sensei looks up at the grey sky that’s beginning to darken. Snowflakes begin to fall lightly. Today was warm, but the flakes are big. It’s a gentle kind of snow. However, even if the snow is white and gentle, it’s still cold.

“Utsumi-kun said before that not everyone gets the freedom of being able to live, but I personally think that having the ability to choose whether we live or not is what makes us human.”

“The ability...?”

“Yeah. I think humans are the only ones to choose their own life and death, and take responsibility for themselves. At least, I think I have that right. On the other hand… we don’t have the right to deny her the choice.” He says that without even knowing her circumstances, then says “I’m going home now,” to me.

“But… what right do you have?”

“Huh?”

“What right do you have to talk about responsibility?!”

All the anger inside of me bursts out. There’s no reason for me to sit back and let him say things like that. But this isn’t some math equation. There’s isn’t just one correct answer.

“You can only say that because you don’t know what it’s like to lose someone close to you!”

He looks surprised at how forceful I’m being. That’s right, he has no idea. None at all. The feeling of knowing your family member won’t be coming home anymore, the pain of being unable to vent your anger and sadness…

“I…”

“If there’s someone who is going to die right in front of you, it’s not a matter of responsibility or rights! I don’t know if it’s more complicated than that, but I can’t stand it! Isn’t it natural to feel like you have to stop someone from ending their own life?!”

When my mom and dad argue, my dad sometimes says things that are illogical, or sound silly, but is it really so bad to be emotional? Is there something wrong with going off your instincts?

“Whatever, I’ll just look for her on my own.”

My vision is blurred from my tears, but I don't want to wipe them until I've walked away. The tears feel icy cold on my cheeks.

"Kougami…" Sensei suddenly grabs my arm.

"Let go!"

"Kougami, no matter what you say, I don't think my opinion is wrong. But I'm also irresponsible, and I try to make myself look better in front of my students."

"...Sensei?"

"Unlike you, I don't think I could find that woman. But if I let you walk off into this crowd on your own, and something happened to you, I'd feel responsible. I'd be distraught over it." He lets out a big sigh.

Then, he says, "well, let's go. But I'm going to say this one more time. If we can't find her, it's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. You don't have to feel any responsibility."

"But…"

"No, listen to me properly. This is important. I truly don't think you'll be able to find the woman who dropped that letter. If you decide to give up, whether it's in 10 minutes or a few hours, it's not your fault." He pulls down his mask, speaking calmly and directly.

Is he just heartless? I bite my lips to keep quiet.

"...I'm starting to hate you, Isozaki-sensei."

"That's fine. I like myself most of all, so I don't mind if you hate me." He nonchalantly shrugs his shoulders. I don't think he's lying, which is even more frustrating. "But you'd better be prepared. You're likely just wasting your time, understand? You're trying to carry the weight of someone else's life right now. You have to be ready to share enough kindness to help that person."

"...Sensei?"

"If you're unsuccessful here, it might stick with you for the rest of your life. No matter how much you let your rose vines grow, they still might not bloom. It'll only hurt you. I'm the most important person to myself, so I don't go out on a limb to shoulder other peoples' burdens. I don't want flowers that won't bloom… That's why I'm not happy about you carrying this burden."

"..."

I think I understand what he's trying to say… He's worried about me, as a teacher. He looks a little more serious than usual. I feel a bit teary eyed. I thought he was too mean and selfish to worry about other people.

"But… I still want to look for her. If I give up now, I would feel worse than if I didn't find her. I'll definitely find her, even if I have to do it alone," I say clearly.

I understand that he only said all of that for my sake, but I won't change my decision.

"...Well, it's cold, so let's get some amazake from that stand first."

He points at a white tent nearby. They appear to by selling karaage and amazake there.

"Sure, I guess? Is it okay to give that to your student?"

"Just think of it as me kindly allowing you to borrow a cup. They say it's good for your skin, too."

"You might look nice, but you're the lowest of the low, huh?"

"It's fine, as long as I look nice. I have to look at myself in the mirror after a bath every night and think that I'm the most attractive man on the planet, otherwise I don't feel well the next morning," he says, making a sour expression.

I even hate his inner thoughts. I can't sympathize with him at all.

"Sensei… you know, you're kinda… super weird."

"I don't want to be told that by a girl who's seriously crying over a stranger in a huge crowd of people," he replies, pouting, then points at the shop again.

I really don't like him, after all. But when we change classes next year, it might be nice if he was my home room teacher.

The days in winter are really short. Since night falls so quickly, it becomes harder and harder to find people. Thanks to the illuminated snow sculptures, we can still see a bit.

"Ah…"

"Did you see her?"

"...No."

As expected, we can't find the woman in the black coat. I had the staff make some announcements at the venue, but they didn't contact me, so I guess she didn't show up. Instead, I saw something I didn't want to see. I can see Chika and Toma-kun clinging to each other and holding hands in the crowd.

"Kougami?"

"...It's strange, isn't it? There's so many people, and they all seems to be having fun, yet there's someone trying to commit suicide, a lost child crying… and even people who lied to their friends so they could go do something else."

Maybe she went back to look for the ring. I mutter while looking at the people I pass by while riding on my last hope that she's at the bridge. There's even more people on the bridge than before. It must be because the projection mapping on the huge snow sculpture is starting. It's almost 7pm, when the fireworks launch.

"And yet, everyone is happy and smiling… how beautiful…"

Leaning against the guardrail, I look out at all the lights and colours. This year they're doing a special effects collaboration with a hero from a popular children's series. There's young children cheering nearby.

"...This city is so gorgeous, I wish that person could be happy, too…"

We search the bridge, but in the end, we don't find the woman in the black coat. I don't want to accept what Isozaki-sensei said, however, my heart is sinking, and I want to give up.

"...Sensei."

"Yeah?"

—Let's stop. For some reason, I can't get the words out. But I'm… already at my wit's end.

"Sensei, let's-"

"Oh, there she is! I'm so glad! Yuri-chan!"

"Huh?" I turn towards the crowd and see Utsumi-san running towards me. "Oh!"

"Sorry, Kougami! I didn't see your calls." And next to him is Tatewaki-kun.

"Why didn't you answer?! I called you so many times!"

"Well… I kinda lost my phone when we met up…"

I notice Sakurako-san next to him.

"Sakurako-san!" I run up to her and give her a hug.

She hugs me back. She puts her warm hands on my cheeks and says, “you must be freezing.”

“Well, a lot happened. After I took that kid to the missing child centre, I found someone who lost a camera just around the corner. Apparently they had important pictures on there and really needed to find it, so I helped them look.” Utsumi-san gives a long explanation, just like always. “Then when I went to the lost and found centre, I saw these two. That’s why it took me so long to find you again.” He says apologetically.

Thanks to him helping so many people, I finally get to meet up with Sakurako-san and Tatewaki-kun.

“But how did you lose something so important? If you don’t have your phone, I can’t contact Sakurako-san!”

“What?! Is that all I’m good for?!”

“Anyway, Yuriko, I heard about everything from Utsumi. Show me the letter and the ring.” Sakurako-san is just as impatient as usual. She quickly loses interest in my conversation with Tatewaki-kun, and gets right to the point.

“Right… Here it is.”

Even though they’re late, I’m glad they’re here now. I hand Sakurako-san the letter and ring.

“You think this may not be a real diamond, right?”

“That’s right.” Isozaki-sensei nods.

“Boy, shine your light on it.”

She shines the flashlight from Tatewaki-kun’s phone on the ring, and takes her car keys out of her pocket. She looks at the ring through a loupe on the compass attached to her keychain. It’s the same compass she used when we climbed the mountain where my grandma died.

“I see… As Isozaki said, this is probably an artificial diamond.” She snorts, and lowers the loupe.

“Then it isn’t very valuable?”

“Well… to other people.” She looks at the letter, and bursts out laughing.

“Sakurako-san?”

“This is the suicide note? It’s not a suicide note, it’s a letter addressed to a particular person… Probably the person with the initials K.H.”

“But… On the bridge, I’m sure she…”

“The number engraved on the ring is probably a death date, not a wedding anniversary… Do you guys know about mourning jewelry and memorial jewelry? Mourning as in grieving, not the time of day. During the Victorian era there was a custom where people would take the hair of a loved one who had died, and make accessories using the hair and fossilized wood, called jet. This ring is probably made from modern jet.”

“It’s… hair?”

Wearing the hair of the deceased. Am I a heartless person for finding that creepy? However, I’m even more surprised as Sakurako-san continues talking.

“The hair isn’t that surprising compared to the fact that this diamond is made from the ashes of someone who was cremated.”

“Ashes?!” Tatewaki-kun, Utsumi-san, and I all say at the same time.

“Carbon can be taken from the remains, and processed into a diamond with high heat and pressure. Well, at that point the corpse is already just cinders. However, it’s very expensive, and most importantly, has to be done with ashes. It’s a unique diamond that’s precious to the owner.”

“Then why would she throw it away…? And are you sure this isn’t a suicide note?”

It makes even less sense now. It’s not that I don’t believe Sakurako-san, but I can’t just blindly believe her saying it isn’t a suicide note without proof.

“I don’t think she was throwing it away. She was probably sending it to someone.”

“Sending it where?” Tatewaki-kun asks.

“To the other shore.”

“...Like, the land of the dead?”

Sakurako-san nods. “I don’t know who she meant to send it to, but I’m assuming they were a “partner” of some sort. Perhaps she now feels the need to say goodbye to her partner for whatever reason? If not, the note should be left with the bereaved family. I can’t imagine they live in this river.” She says, putting the letter into the envelope.

We should definitely leave the note here. She doesn’t need to die just so they can be together.

“This is a precious stone. It can’t be sold or thrown away. She might have felt guilty that she was “replacing” her former partner, so she chose to leave it here.”

I look into the river. The festival lights are reflecting off the dark water.

“She was trying to say her goodbyes to her former partner, despite being in different worlds now. She can start a new life now. It’s impossible to extract DNA from a diamond like this, but there’s often a small identifier engraved into it. There aren’t too many companies that turn ashes into diamonds, and it looks like they died in the last 3 years. We could try asking around at different companies if you’d like to find out more about them. They might not have the customer’s information on file anymore, but if you ask, they might be willing to deliver it to them for you.” Sakurako-san says, putting the ring into the envelope.

Instead of handing it to me, she folds the envelope in half. “But I think the best way to deal with it is like this.”

“Ah!”

She throws it in the air. Before anyone can stop her, the letter falls toward the river. The wind blows it further from the bridge, until it gets swallowed by the dark water.

“Sakurako-san!”

“It’s fine. She’s already in a new chapter of her life. This would just be the same as any other rock to her.” She laughs.

Sensei, Utsumi-san, and I all look at each other.

“But… All of our hard work…” Utsumi-san puts his head in his hands.

In the same moment, the fireworks marking the first day of the winter festival light up the sky. Whenever I watch them, I somehow stop feeling cold. The fireworks are like flowers blooming in the sky, just for a single moment. I hope that person is watching them from somewhere, too.

“I guess I won, sensei.”

“...What?”

“If I gave up before like you said I would, I wouldn’t have gotten to see the fireworks like this.” I say, while Isozaki-sensei happily watches the fireworks.

I give him a triumphant grin. He gives me a troubled expression back.

“...No, it was a tie, since you had to rely on Kujo-san.”

“No, I won! Sakurako-san was just part of my victory. After this, you’d better treat Sakurako-san and I to some hot chocolate.”

“...No, Shoutarou should be the one treating you, since he lost his phone.”

“Huh?”

Tatewaki-kun was happily watching the fireworks until he suddenly heard his name mentioned. I think this is the first time I’ve agreed with Isozaki-sensei. After a cold February, spring slowly approaches. One step at a time. But it’ll still take a little more patience before it warms up. I hope the path that the woman, whose name I still don’t know, chose leads to spring. I gently pray that she’s happy with her new life.

Third Bone: Frozen Lie

Part 1

Although the people of Hokkaido aren't really thought of as "good at skiing", I think there's some level of skill most people here have. Of course there's regional differences, like some places where skating is preferred over skiing, but at least in central and northern Hokkaido, most people born here can ski to some extent. The reason being is that skiing is always part of PE classes from elementary school to high school, or even as early as kindergarten. During winter, there's several days where classes bring packed lunches up to the nearest ski hill to practice for the day. Even though we all have to do it, some people are better than others, and some like it more than others. Since we had to bring our own ski wear from home, most people just had hand-me-downs from their siblings, but some kids would show up with new, shiny clothes every year to show off how wealthy they are.

My best friend, Imai, always had pink skis, because he has two older sisters. Nobody made fun of him, though, because he's so good at skiing. The pink skis make him look strangely cool when he slides down the advanced courses. I would usually get a new pair every two years or so, so I always had a shiny, new pair to use.

Still,I hated skiing at first. No matter how hard I tried, I could never do it as well as Imai. I'm not jealous of him anymore, though. I've long since given up, and decided that his body has a much higher potential for sports than mine. But when I was still in elementary school, I couldn't stand how much better he was, so I went skiing with my grandpa every week. Sometimes I'd even go two or three times in a single week. Thanks to that, now I can go on the advanced courses with Imai, and I even have fun skiing. As a high school student now, I can choose to go skiing voluntarily, but in the end, I always just end up only skiing for class. It's fun and all, but wearing all the equipment and standing outside in the cold gets exhausting.

"Huh? You're going to Asahidake on the weekend?"

"Yeah. Chiyoda-san's relative has a holiday home there."

When I get home from school, I find my mom wearing her best formal clothes and carrying a cake. Apparently she met Shouko-san for tea at the hotel near the station. I was worried my mom wouldn't get along with her after the Hakodate incident, so I'm relieved to see that's not the case. She's complaining that she drank too much coffee, so I wonder how long she was there for. I wonder how women can talk for hours on end like that.

"So do you want to go skiing at Asahidake?"

"Well it is the perfect time of year, but isn't this kind of sudden?" I ask, trying to hide my disappointment at the small size of the strawberry shortcake.

My mom isn't the type of person who talks about exercise or sports much, so it's strange for her to bring up skiing. The rich cream goes great with the strawberries, and it's soft enough to melt in your mouth, but the pieces are way too small. I hope my dissatisfaction doesn't show in my voice.

"Apparently the owner of the property died suddenly last fall. It hasn't been used in a long time, so it needs to be cleaned up."

Hearing that makes me remember the incident with Shouko-san's grandfather. He was a dreadful man, who even earned the nickname Don Juan. He died of a heart attack on his birthday before. That was in the summer, rather than the fall, though.

"A relative, huh… I wonder who it was."

"Apparently they died of heart failure, despite being quite young. It seems like he died while alone at the house, so his wife and son can't bring themselves to clean the place up."

"I see," I add.

I really wonder who it was. I've already met most of Shouko-san's close relatives. I attended the party where her grandfather died while I pretended to be her partner, and I helped receive the condolence messages after his death. I can't remember most of their faces and names, since I only talked to a few properly. If someone says something like "so-and-so's brother," then I can usually piece it together.

"But… I see, that's why Shouko-san is going instead."

Shouko-san is a kind, caring person. Since we don't live that close, I was worried about not being there for her enough when things went awry.

"Yeah. It seems his son was going to accompany her at first, but he said he has too much work to do. But we need a man's help, right? Someone else agreed to help, but he got busy with work, too."

Busy with work… Could it have been Ariwara-san? In that case, I'm just a last choice replacement. To celebrate my discharge from the hospital, Ariwara-san gave me high-performance innerwear that's good for rehabilitation and function recovery. It's good at retaining heat, so it's useful when I'm walking Hector, or shovelling snow at the Kujou residence.

"The hotel that Chiyoda-san's parents run is nearby, so they'll provide food and we can use the hot spring there, and ski a bit during the day. So you can help me a little between going to play."

"Well, that's fine but…"

Of course helping won't be fun, but between skiing and the hot spring, I can't find a reason to refuse. But travelling after what happened in Hakodate… Rather, I wonder if my mom is okay with it.

"Well… this time 'that person' won't be with us."

"Oh, I think it's fine."

Of course, the person we're talking about is Sakurako-san. Well, I wasn't expecting her to go with us for cleaning and skiing.

"My mom wanted to come help, but she's already booked to go to the hot spring with her friends on the weekend."

"Oh, she's staying at Noboribetsu for two night starting on Friday, right?"

My mom has been planning to go to the hot spring with her friends for the past 6 months.

"That's why I'm in a hurry, so can I ask you to do it?"

"It's fine, since it's a request from Shouko-san."

If it's fine with my mom, I'd like to go.

"...But 'that person' really won't be going, right?" My mom says, suddenly looking anxious. She must be really worried about it.

"I don't think she'd want to in the first place. I can't imagine her skiing, and she doesn't seem like the type who would enjoy cleaning."

I don't think Sakurako-san would agree, no matter how much Shouko-san begged, anyway.

"That's fine, then. Make sure you help properly, okay?" She says with a relieved smile.

At times like this, I always feel guilty. My mom doesn't know I've been talking to Sakurako-san on the phone every day, let alone that I still meet with her frequently. I don't want to lie to my mom, but I also can't lose Sakurako-san. Especially not what Hanabusa could be aiming for any of us. I'm sorry, mom. I try to stifle those thoughts as I drink my now-lukewarm tea.

Part 2

We're meeting in front of the Asahikawa station. It's a lot nicer here now, after being redeveloped recently. Eventually, a HiAce with the name of the Asahidake hot spring on the side stops in front of me, and Shouko-san gets out. She's wearing a white knit shirt, and a tight, black skirt. She looks just as elegant as usual.

"Oh."

Another person I recognize appears from the car. The leader of the Toudou group, as well as Shouko-san and Ariwara-san's cousin, Kouji Toudou. As cousins, he has some resemblance to Ariwara-san, like his pointed jaw and straight nose. Their appearances differ in his thick eyebrows, soft eyes, and "young master" type of haircut.

"'Oh…'? Why do you sound so disappointed?"

"No, I was just wondering which relative you were."

"Sorry, that was wrong of me."

"...It's fine."

It's not like I hate him or anything… Rather, among Shouko-san's relatives, he's relatively nice and easy to read. But in comparison to Ariwara-san, of course I feel kind of disappointed to see him. At least I know he's not a bad guy.

"Well, whatever. Thank you for coming all this way to help me today." Kouji-san says, giving me a slight nod.

Why is he thanking me when he's the one whose family member passed away? I look at Shouko-san.

"Today, we're going to clean Kou-chan's dad's villa."

That's a pretty roundabout way of telling me it was his dad that died.

"Is that so… I'm sorry for your loss." I bow my head.

"...Yeah. Well, he did always have a weak body," Kouji-san says with a lonely smile. "But it was so sudden… It was really shocking."

There's another person in the car, with her sunglasses down. It's both of their aunt, Chiyoda-san. I bow my head again. Her expensive-looking floral pattern dress looks a little- no actually, looks really gaudy. It kind of suits her, in a way. Her hair has been cut a lot shorter compared to last time we met, so I don't recognize her on sight. Her tone of voice and plump lips give it away, though. I haven't seen either of these two since I went to Shouko-san's grandfather's birthday party. They were with me on that sad night.

Chiyoda-san understands Shouko-san well, especially with her difficult relationship with her parents.

“Well… When your parents die, it doesn’t matter if it’s sudden or gradual. It’s always hard to deal with.” Kouji-san says to Chiyoda-san before turning back to me.

“There’s nothing I can do about it! It’s already been 49 days, so there’s no point in moping around anymore. I have to tidy the place up, and I can even take my new snowmobile for a spin! I’ve already made arrangements, so let’s all get back in the car!” Kouji-san says, with as much of a smile as he can muster.

“O-okay.”

It’s hard to think that he’s around the same age as Ariwara-san when he says things so innocently like that. I load up all my luggage into the car. Shouko-san has a calm smile on her face. I get into the HiAce like I was told. It seems like the hotel in Asahidake that I stayed at before is owned by Kouji-san’s company now. It wasn’t all that nice back then, but I’m sure it’s much better now. Kouji-san seems like a good manager, after all.

He was acting so upbeat about everything that I didn’t realize at first that he said he bought a snowmobile. He says he loves motorsports.

Are we not leaving yet? While wondering that, he tells me about the snow hill climb race that’s going to be held in Rusutsu next week where they compete to climb the ski slopes faster on a motorbike. Suddenly, the car door is thrown open.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Huh?”

A voice and figure I’m all too familiar with climbs into the car.

“Sakurako-san?! What? Why are you here?”

I look at Shouko-san, shocked, but she’s wrinkling her eyebrows.

“Honestly… Ozawa-san and the relatives were unhappy about it, too. She would have been alone in the house for 3 days, so I’m supposed to look after her… But I guess she can’t come because of Shou-chan’s mom, huh?”

Apparently this was all really sudden, and she doesn’t have anyone else to stay with for these 3 days.

“Uh… Ah, well, I think it’s okay as long as you don’t tell her...”

Sakurako-san isn’t a child, I’m sure she can stay home alone for a night or two… But I’m sure she has her own reason for it. I know I wouldn’t feel right staying home alone in a lifeless house full of skeletons.

“Somehow, I feel guilty. I think I’ll check with your mom, after all.”

“It’s fine!”

If anyone tells my mom, she definitely wouldn’t be fine with it. I definitely don’t want to lie to my mom, but I can’t do anything about this situation. I hold up my finger over my mouth to say, “it’s a secret.”

“Alright, fine. It’s normal for high school boys to have a girl-related secret or two they keep from their parents.” Yachiyo-san teases me while she lets Sakurako-san sit in the seat next to her.

“Alright, just promise not to find any dead bodies or bones, okay?”

Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders. I feel bad for Yachiyo-san, but it’s probably impossible.

“Oh yeah, what about Hector?”

If Sakurako-san is here, where’s her four legged companion?

“Yuriko is taking care of him.”

“Huh?”

“Kou-chan isn’t very good with dogs.” Shouko-san tries to force a smile.

“Eh…”

I guess that’s why he didn’t come. If Sakurako-san is going to be here, I wish she’d brought him so he can sleep on my bed. I dream of being able to sleep with a fluffy dog in my arms.

“When he was a kid, the shepherd at Naoe’s house bit him on the butt.”

“Don’t tell them that!”

Yachiyo-san laughs at Kouji-san’s embarrassment.

“It was just a play bite, so his screaming only made it funnier.”

I guess he hasn’t been a fan of dogs since then.

I’m sure it would be scary to be attacked by a shepherd, but I can’t imagine a fluffy, gentle dog like Hector doing that.

“It may sound funny now, but to a 5 year old, big dogs look like wild beasts.”

I have to bite my tongue so I don’t tell him he’s already an adult now. I guess it was traumatic for him.

“Well, Yuriko was happy to do it.” Sakurako-san says, taking off her coat.

“That’s good…”

I’m really envious of Kougami. Kouji-san leaves the seat next to me, and moves to the driver’s seat.

“Oh? You’re driving, Kouji-san?”

“Is that a complaint I hear?”

“No… I’m just wondering if you’ll be okay. Asahidake has some really windy roads.”

I’m more worried about if he’s a good driver. After hearing him talk about riding motorbikes up snowy mountains, I’m kinda scared.

“I may not look like it, but I’m confident in my driving abilities.”

“...Really?”

When he looks over his shoulder at us in the backseat, I somehow feel like it’ll be okay.

“You have an international driver’s license, and you’re licensed to operate an excavator, right?”

“I like collecting useless licenses. I even have my boating license,” Kouji-san says proudly.

“Wow… That’s kind of surprising.”

Boating aside, I can’t really imagine someone who grew up privileged like Kouji-san operating an excavator. Even today, he’s wearing a pretty stylish jacket. A convertible would suit him better than a HiAce like this.

“It has nothing to do with the Toudou family, I just wanted to work as a car maker. My dad used to collect classic cars as a hobby, and he did all the maintenance himself. I always thought it was so cool.”

“But then he sold them to an acquaintance. He asked them to set the price, too. It was such a waste,” Yachiyo-san says sadly.

“It’s fine. I would have just let those treasures go unused. Those kinds of things should go to someone who will truly love and take care of them. It’s better to give them to someone who you know will take care of them, rather than selling them at a high price to a stranger at an auction.” His smile as he speaks is overflowing with his love for cars. “I like driving more than repairing. I want to operate anything that I can.”

His driving is really smooth, and the car begins to glide down the road in front of the station. We’re on the way to Asahidake now. We leave Asahikawa, and head for the neighbouring town, Higashikawa.

Along the way, I buy a Jun Dog at Asahikawa station to eat as a late breakfast. There’s fried shrimp, chicken cutlet, and sausage ones. Each one is fried food wrapped in rice, like a cylindrical onigiri. It’s just simple fast food, but the fried shrimp is a tender masterpiece, and the chicken cutlet is moist and soft. The one I most highly recommend is the sausage, though. When you bite into the battered and fried sausage, the juice overflows into your mouth. It goes without saying that the sweet sauce and soy sauce base go great with the rice. The texture is a little more chewy than shrimp, giving you a sense of satisfaction. After finishing all three kinds, I still feel like I want to eat a bit more. There’s a pleasant feeling of fullness in my stomach as I look out the car window while we pass the Chuubetsu dam, and start climbing Asahidake.

As the altitude increases, the forests of mizunara and white birch trees change into conifers. I’m looking for deer and foxes near the sides of the road. It’s more because I’d like to see one rather than because I’m worried about them jumping out onto the road. However, the road is windy, so I can’t see very far. In the end, we arrive at the hot spring town 1100m above sea level without seeing any animals.

Although I call it a town, there’s no convenience stores, and it’s just a few hotels lined up. However, in winter it’s used as a boarding house for people doing winter sports such as cross-country skiing, and it’s packed with mountain climbers from summer to fall. More accurately, it’s not your typical ski resort since it feels more like a snowy mountain you happen to be able to ski on, so it isn’t very suitable for beginners. There’s almost no signs for the courses, only course settings on the front of the building. There’s intermediate, advanced, and expert level courses you can use at your own risk if you feel like you’re skilled enough, or you can skate on the level ground.

Asahidake is the peak of the Daisetsuzan mountain range, and goes up to an elevation of 2291m. On the official website for the ropeway that connects the highest peak in Hokkaido to the 5th station that we’re at it says “Asahidake, in Daisetsuzan National Park you can see the latest lingering snow, latest cherry blossoms blooming, earliest fall leaves, and first snow in Japan.” It’s true that even during golden week the snow is still deep enough that you can comfortably enjoy skiing. But for me, Asahidake is mostly about mountaineering, since I’m not so familiar with full-blown backcountry skiing. During the winter I usually just hike around to the back of the stratus gorge. The reason I go there is because there’s a festival called the Icefall festival where they light up the frozen waterfall. Besides, it’s too cold in the winter so open air baths freeze, so you have to prepare for some extra inconvenience if you go to hot springs. It can’t be helped when your opponent is as grand as nature itself, but somehow I can’t bring myself to go.

This is my first time visiting Asahidake in February. It takes nearly an hour to get here from the Asahikawa station. We head to Kouji-san’s hotel first, and grab shoukadou bentou for

lunch before going skiing. Seeing the portion sizes for lunch makes me glad I had those Jun Dogs. I feel like I'd starve to death. Yachiyo-san and Shouko-san decide to head to the villa first, but Sakurako-san and I decide to rent skiing equipment from the hotel instead.

Asahidake has fluffy, powdery snow. I like skiing when the snow flutters around like that. Thanks to the high quality snow, it makes me feel like I'm better at skiing than I actually am. Kouji-san isn't very good at skiing, either. Sakurako-san slides down the mountain at her own pace. Her white clothes make her seem to disappear in the snow. I wonder why it seems special to see someone in skiwear?

"What is it?"

"I-it's nothing! I just thought… You were surprisingly normal."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I kinda thought you'd either be amazing at skiing, or trembling like a newborn fawn. I didn't expect you to have such a normal skill level."

I make up an excuse for why I was looking at her.

"I went to school, too, so of course I'm not terrible at it. I still don't understand what's so fun about skiing."

"Isn't it about the feeling of going really fast?"

She adjusts her goggles, making a face like she's wondering "what's fun about going fast?" Her cheeks are all red from the cold, it's cute.

"Shoutarou!" An unexpectedly loud voice calls my name. Kouji-san is happily running towards us.

"Shoutarou! Let's ride the snowmobile! Oh, and we can bring the snow scooter, too!"

"Snow scooter?"

"It's like a bike but with a board instead of tires. It's like a snowmobile as a bike, but without an engine. You can slide down the mountain on it!"

"Wow."

"Let's go right now!"

Kouji-san really looks like he's just a big child right now. You wouldn't think he's a full grown man in his 30s when he's acting like a kid in a candy store.

Sakurako-san says she doesn't want to go with us, so I walk her back to the villa and drop off my skis. Kouji-san's father's villa is a short 10 minute walk from the hotel. It's higher up the mountain from the hotel, and in a bit of a secluded spot. The large, log house coupled with the snowy landscape and white forests makes it feel like a foreign country, like Canada or Finland.

"It's pretty cold, huh? Did you have fun?" Shouko-san comes to greet us in a white apron.

I feel guilty about going to play while she started working. She brings me a cafe au lait with a smile.

"It's fine, don't worry about it. In fact, we should play a little more while it's still light out."

I feel like I'm being spoken to like a little kid, but I force a smile. Kouji-san is a good guy, but he's still stubborn like a kid. Somehow, the word "play" suits him, though.

"Kouji-san… Isn't there something we should be helping with?"

I find it hard to believe I'm looking at one of the authorities in the Toudou group.

“You’ll always be a kid, huh, Kou-chan?” Shouko-san mutters and lightly slaps his cheek. “...But when running a hotel, you also have to think about keeping your guests entertained. When we have a family as guests, we want them to come back again. Their kids will be saying ‘I want to go back again!’ after.”

I see, that’s why there’s often events for children in commercials and on TV. Once I saw a collaboration with a children’s anime series where they had a mystery solving event using the facilities at the hotel.

“To start with, you shouldn’t provide kids with things that adults won’t enjoy. But you can’t look down on kids, either- oh well, please accompany that overgrown child. Let’s start cleaning.”

“Huh? But…”

Is it really okay for me to not help clean? Shouko-san notices my distress, and gives me a lonely smile.

“...I most brought you to keep him company, since I didn’t want him sticking around here. This is solitary work. We just need him to decide whether to keep some things or get rid of them. So don’t worry about this, Shou-chan.”

“Ah… Is that so.”

Of course, she’ll need a boy to help with any heavy lifting. However, it seems that the reason I was brought along was mostly to keep Kouji-san away from the villa. No wonder I get such good conditions, like going skiing and the hot spring.

“I’m sorry, it must seem like I’m forcing you to babysit.”

“Babysit… It’s fine, but…” I give a strained smile.

In that case, I guess I can just freely do what I want. After all, I’m a kid, too. It’d be a lie to say I wouldn’t be happy to play with a big toy.

“I’m counting on you, then,” Shouko-san says.

I still feel a bit guilty about leaving the cleaning to Shouko-san, but I feel a little lighter now.

“Got it.”

“It takes more work than playing with Hector,” Sakurako-san says, sighing. I smile and nod, but couldn’t I say the same thing about her?

Part 3

Even though they said all that, I have a strange feeling of unity with Kouji-san. I love bikes, so we talk about my favourite kind of bike, and bikes I want to ride someday while we get into the snowmobile. The snowmobile moves steadily through the snow. It’s a lot more fun than being in a car. Kouji-san yells in excitement. Even though I’m behind him, his excitement infects me. It’s exciting, but also a little scary. I’m not used to riding one, and Kouji-san isn’t used to driving one, so I can’t trust him 100%.

“Uwahhh!”

The snowmobile knocks a bunch of powdery snow into the air as we make a sharp turn. I cling to Kouji-san so I don’t get shaken off, and yell in both fear and joy.

“Is this your first time on a snowmobile?”

“I’ve ridden on a banana boat being pulled behind one at a winter event before!” I have to shout my reply so he can hear me over all the noise.

In addition, I’ve also done snow rafting, where you sit on a rubber boat being pulled behind a snowmobile at winter events sometimes. But this is my first time on an actual snowmobile. It’s really scary and fun. It’s faster than I expected. It’s so fast that the wind actually hurts as it hits my body. It’s not like I hate it, though. As Kouji-san gradually gets used to controlling the snowmobile, he starts going faster, and takes sharper turns. The sharp, rough turns make it even more exciting.

“Hahaha!”

Our laughs echo across the snowy mountainside until the scenery suddenly changes in an instant.

“Huh?”

I feel like I’m floating for half a second, then immediately hit the ground. I can’t process what happened for a minute. I can see the snow falling from the grey sky, with the weight of gravity pushing against me. The impact hitting my back knocks the wind out of me.

“N… ngh!”

I still can’t understand what happened. I guess I got thrown off the snowmobile and landed in the snow.

“A… Are you okay?” Kouji-san asks me in a frail voice. He’s lying face down in the snow a short way away from me.

“I’m… fine.”

Luckily, the snow cushioned the fall. I force myself up, despite the spot where I got stabbed throbbing.

“...Trees?”

The snowmobile is flipped over next to a pine tree.

“I didn’t think there’d be… a drop here,” Kouji-san says weakly.

Apparently there’s a lot less snow under the pine trees.

“Ahh this isn’t good. It’s completely stuck.”

The snowmobile is buried under all the snow. Both of us desperately try to dig it out, but half of it is completely buried. It’s too much for two people to dig it out alone.

“This is really bad, huh?”

“Is there anything we can use to dig it out? Or a rope?” I ask, but Kouji-san shakes his head.

“...Huh?”

I hurriedly take my phone out of my chest pocket. Fortunately, it didn’t break from my fall, but there’s no service here.

“What should we do? My phone is out of range.”

“For real?” Kouji-san stares blankly.

“...So do you have any idea where we are?”

“...”

My question goes unanswered. Out in the snow, surrounded by pine trees covered in more snow, we have no clue where we are.

“I…I’m never playing you again, Kouji-san!” I accidentally shout.

Apparently he doesn’t hear the fear in my voice, since he just shrugs and says “sorry”.

“Well, I guess we can just follow the tracks and walk back?” Kouji-san says in a carefree voice.

How can he say that so easily?

“That’s great, but haven’t we covered a pretty big distance, and is it okay to just leave the snowmobile?”

In some situations, it’s safer to not try to move around or go back. It may be relatively warm during the day, but little by little the temperature will start to drop. I check my watch, it’s 3 o’clock. It’ll be dark in less than an hour. Could we walk back to the villa in an hour?

“Huh? Then, could it be… we’re in a bad situation?” Kouji-san seems to have noticed my anxiety since he talks in a weak, frightened voice.

I don’t respond. We have no protection against the cold besides the ski gear we’re both wearing. We basically have no food, either. I have one mountaineering chocolate bar in my pocket, but that’s it.

“Kouji-san, do you smoke?”

“No, rather, I’m very anti-smoking. It makes your house dirty, and the tar is a computer’s natural enemy.”

Since I’m a minor, I don’t smoke either, of course. Neither of us have a lighter. I’ve never climbed a snowy mountain before, but my paternal grandpa liked mountaineering and he told me “never eat snow, no matter how bad the situation is!” It takes calories to turn ice into water in your body. Fatigue can be the line between life and death. My throat is already dry. We can’t even prepare drinkable water right now.

“We… couldn’t be stranded, right?” Kouji-san says, crying, to me who has accidentally been silent for a while now.

And whose fault is that?! I want to say that, but there’s no point in arguing. It’s just a waste of energy. All of a sudden, an unpleasant thought pops into my head.

“...”

What if Kouji-san is one of Hanabusa’s pawns?

“...I-It’ll be fine. Once they notice we’re missing, Sakurako-san and the others will look for us.”

-No, they might not. I can’t think like that. I have to force my best smile and cheerful voice. I don’t want to doubt Kouji-san, but I can’t help being pessimistic. Maybe by mentioning Sakurako-san, Kouji-san will be more cautious about his moves. Besides that, thinking that Sakurako-san might help gives me some courage. Yeah, we’ll be fine. I’m positive that she’ll track us down and save me. I’m sure she’ll know where we are. We’re not completely stranded.

“It’s starting to snow more than earlier, so we should take cover under the tree. The snowmobile can protect us from the wind, too.” I say. We both sit down under the branches.

Somehow, I feel pretty calm right now, so I’m more worried about Kouji-san. I try bringing up motorsports to take his mind off things. We talk about cars, bikes, and motorcycles. Maybe the two of us can go on a biking trip in the summer. He seems to enjoy talking about it, but a biking trip with Kouji-san sounds kind of dangerous. The stories he tells are fun, too. He’s flown

an airplane overseas, and he knows an F1 racer. His stories sound a little like he's bragging, but it makes my fear and unease disappear for a while.

"At the Milan international motorcycle show in November, Yamaha's YXF, R1M..."

Eventually, the topic shifts to motorcycles. When Kouji-san starts talking enthusiastically about something, he reminds me of my dad. If my dad was alive, would he talk about motorcycles with me like this? I feel happy, lonely, and sad all at the same time. I only snap out of my thoughts when I notice a sound coming closer and closer to us.

"What's that?"

I thought it was just my imagination at first, or tinnitus or something. After a minute, I'm sure that it's an actual noise. It's a low, mechanical sound… Like a snowplow on the street in the middle of a winter night.

"Heeeeeeey!" Kouji-san stands up, waving his arms.

I stand up, too, and see a big, red car approaching us.

"S-Sakurako-san!"

I start to cry. I can see her in the passenger seat of the red snowcat. See, I knew it! I was right! I knew Sakurako-san would definitely come.

"There you are. You guys really are beyond help," Sakurako-san says with a sour look once the snowcat stops.

"Ootomo-san! Thank you!" Kouji-san leaps toward the old man driving the car.

"Be careful, owner. Most places around here are designated as special protection areas, so snowmobiles are forbidden from entering. Even if you try to be aware of the environment as you drive around, this isn't exactly a praiseworthy thing to do."

"...Right." Kouji-san nods, accepting his scolding.

"But why are you here, anyway?" I ask. Sakurako-san shrugs and points to a pine tree.

"It's a creeping pine."

"Creeping pine?"

"It's hard for snow to pile up under them. It's hard to notice, but sometimes they create a pitfall. I figured Kouji probably didn't know that."

That sounds about right. Kouji-san pretends not to hear, and climbs into the snowcat.

"...Are you hurt?" Sakurako-san stares straight at me for a moment. A faint smile floats to my face.

"I'm fine."

She wipes the snow off my shoulders, and places her large hands on my cheeks. They're warm.

"I wish I had gone, too."

"But then there wouldn't be anyone to come help."

"I wouldn't have let him make such a rudimentary mistake. I shouldn't have let you go alone. I'm not fit to be your guardian." She sighs with her brow furrowed. It looks like she really regrets this.

"...My guardian?"

"That's right. I'm about 10 years older than you, right?"

I guess that's true. However, it feels like I'm the one that's always taking care of her. I'm surprised she thinks of us that way. It makes me feel a little reluctant, somehow… I climb into the warm snowcat.

“You really saved us there… It was all my fault.” Kouji-san mumbles, looking completely depressed.

“It doesn’t matter, as long as you were found safely. You really should be more careful, though,” the old man named Ootomo-san says.

“But you were really good at driving the snowmobile, Kouji-san! It was a lot of fun,” I add after his scolding.

It would have been a really fun experience, if it wasn’t for that creeping pine.

“We can dig up the snowmobile and bring it back later, so you go home and rest for today,” Ootomo-san says.

He must need a lot of manpower to dig it up. Kouji-san is looking out the window, looking defeated. The only sound is that of the snowcat treads.

“...So those are creeping pines, huh?” He mutters to himself. “I heard about them from my dad. A long time ago, a creeping pine saved me when I was on the verge of death.”

“You mean just now?” I snicker.

“Now that you mention it… I think I’ve heard of that,” Ootomo-san replies.

“Ootomo-san used to run the hotel I own until it was time for him to retire, so he knows everything about Asahidake.”

“Oh, you’re exaggerating. I’ve just been around for a long time,” Ootomo-san says with a bitter smile.

Even after retiring, he still lives in the hot spring area and does his best to keep an eye on things. It’s especially important in the winter months, when there's lots of tourists here to ski.

“It was around 10 years ago. My dad was climbing the mountain with me. I couldn’t keep up with him because I didn’t feel well, and apparently a nice person helped me when I was waiting under a creeping pine,” Kouji-san says, then he goes silent.

I wonder if he’s thinking about his late father. Ootomo-san stares outside with a bitter expression, then closes his eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

“No… I just noticed the way the wind is blowing.”

“Really? So you can understand that kind of thing?”

“Yeah, I’ve lived here for a long time. It didn’t say it in the forecast, but… It looks like it’ll be stormy today. You should get back to the villa sooner rather than later.”

We ride the snowcat back towards the villa. Everyone in the car is silent on the way back, so the only sound is that of the wind whistling.

Part 4

When we get back to the villa, Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san give Kouji-san a lecture. He’s just sitting on the couch, being scolded. There’s nothing quite like the guilt of being scolded by two women at once.

Before I went skiing, I was jealous that I couldn’t play together with Hector, but it looks like Kougami sent a bunch of pictures of him while my phone was out of range. Pictures of him laying down, sitting, and smiling. His fluffy tail, squishy paws, and wet nose… He’s just so cute. No, but this isn’t out of good intentions. She must be bragging about it. Every time I open a

picture, I can see her enjoying his fluff. Ugh, I'm so jealous of her. I don't know if she intentionally dressed like that, but seeing Kougami wearing her casual wear at home was strangely cute.

"..."

"...Your girlfriend?" Someone suddenly speaks to me from behind while I'm staring at the pictures.

"Huh?! No, just a friend. Actually, you shouldn't be peeking at my phone!" I hide the screen against my chest.

Of all people, it's Kouji-san. He must have been released already.

"She's super cute, you should've brought her. Tell her she can stay at my hotel anytime she wants."

"You shouldn't be saying that to high school students!"

Kouji-san sees through me saying she's just a friend, and teases me. I turn bright red.

"Anyway, the wind sure is strong, huh?"

I look outside to try to escape. The fine snow splatters against the window, like the light of a firework that's about to fade. It's beautiful, but it's cold out there. Dry, powdery snow falls when it's under -15 degrees celsius.

"I hope the storm isn't too rough," Kouji-san says anxiously as he looks out the window.

Somehow, looking out at the cold makes me want to get something warm to drink from the kitchen. When I go into the kitchen, I see the women cleaning up the dishes.

"Are you getting rid of all of this?" I ask as I approach Shouko-san, who is putting away some expensive looking glass cups.

"Ah… I've been thinking of selling this villa, or having it demolished." Kouji-san answers instead.

"Why?"

"Well even if I keep it... nobody will use it."

Sure, Asahidake is a great place for people who love to ski and go mountain climbing, but for those that don't, it must be very inconvenient.

"But… it seems like such a shame," I say, looking around at the villa.

Inside of these white walls are high-class furniture, paintings, stained glass, glass lamps, etc. It really feels like a villa. Even though it's a bit overwhelming for me, it still feels comfortable. The only problem is the creepy mounted animal heads above the fireplace in the living room. However, it's the kind of thing you'd see in a log cabin in a foreign movie, so it fits the atmosphere. There's deer heads, a deer pelt rug, and of course, the one with the biggest impact, a 2 meter tall brown bear. The whole thing has been stuffed, and it's showing its fangs and has both hands up. Unfortunately, from the right wrist onward was broken or lost, so you can see the styrofoam on the inside. It's still a good looking and overbearing decoration, though. Apparently one of Kouji-san's uncles hunts in his spare time, so he gave lots of these as gifts to Kouji-san's father. He didn't feel like he could refuse them, so I guess he decided to leave them up at this villa where they won't be seen as much.

"You must really like skiing, Kouji-san."

"...If you want the villa, I can lower the price for you."

"Please don't tease me like that."

Still, it's a shame to see him get rid of this place. If he kept it, I might have been able to hang out with him more sometime. The snowmobile was a lot of fun, even if it turned into a huge disaster.

"My dad was an architect. He designed and built this place himself… But that's also why this place reminds me of him." He leaves the kitchen, signalling for me to follow. "...This was his bedroom," Kouji-san says, opening the door.

"There's… A lot of books here."

The walls are mostly covered in bookshelves, with the books tightly packed into them. It makes the whole room feel oppressive.

"He was an indoorsy person. When he was tired, or just wanted to be alone, he'd come here to read. He wasn't interested in mountain climbing or skiing, so this villa was more of a place to escape for him." Kouji-san takes a deep breath, staring at the door. He looks like he's trying to get past an invisible wall. "...My dad's siblings didn't think very well of him. My grandpa in particular was really strict with him. My mom was ashamed of him. I always thought that I didn't want to grow up to be like my dad, but… Now I realize that he didn't have anyone on his side." He mumbles, his voice growing hoarse. His voice is soft, almost like a whisper.

He runs his hand along the spines of the books on the shelves. They're mostly thick, hardcover books. There's old books about history, foreign books, and even books about art.

"...Nobody even knew he was here."

He turns to look at the bed. There's no sheets, quilts, or pillows. Only an expensive-looking mattress is left. He sits down on the mattress, and turns on the glass lamp.

"Sometimes my dad would pretend to go to work, but actually come here. Even when he died, he was actually supposed to be in Tokyo. Maybe if I knew that he'd come here, he could have been taken to the hospital right away. He was only discovered a few hours after he died."

"Kouji-san…"

"My mom heard he came here, and when she came to visit in the morning, he was laying on the bed. That's why I wanted help from Shouko-neesan and aunt Yachiyo."

Shouko-san stands in the doorway. I guess she heard his soft voice.

"I've always thought that my mom and dad had a pretty cold relationship… I don't think they had a very strong relationship. But at least if my mom hadn't gone, my dad wouldn't have been found right away. I didn't even notice…" Kouji-san says self-deprecatingly. He's talking as if it's partly his fault that his father died.

"It can't be helped. There's things people keep as secrets for the sake of their loved ones. At least, I know my uncle was proud that you were his son, Ko-chan. That's why he didn't want you to see."

Shouko-san quietly approaches the bed, and hugs Kouji-san's head. Kouji-san squirms for a moment, trying to reject the hug. However, he soon accepts the warmth and reassurance she's giving him. His face warps as he starts to cry.

"But even though we were parent and child, even though I was his son, I didn't understand anything!"

"It's because he was your parent. He was proud to be your father. If you love him, don't blame yourself like this."

Kouji-san's shoulder tremble as he lets out the tears he's been holding back. Seeing Kouji-san face so much sadness and regret makes me want to cry. This must be the reason

Shouko-san wanted to keep Kouji-san away from the villa. That must also be the reason Kouji-san has been trying to stay in high spirits. This place is full of sadness for him. That's why Kouji-san wants to let go of this place.

"Now… Could you help me clean up the kitchen and living room? Should we have a meal and a bath at the hotel as well? Okay?" Shouko-san gently urges Kouji-san to stand up and leave the room behind.

I stand up beside the bed to see them off, then suddenly realize I'm all alone. I turn to the bookshelves again. There're many books, but the large art collection ones particularly stand out. For example there's the complete works of Leonardo da Vinci, The Annunciation, a pre-Raphaelite art book next to that… I don't know about Raphael, but I've heard that Leonardo da Vinci was also an amazing architect. There's also plenty of books in English. The rest are mostly books about architecture both in Japan and abroad.

There's a big snowstorm outside, so the room is dark. The lamp creates long shadows all across the floor. The room is unpleasantly cold, with no signs of life. The bookshelf is so high that I'm worried it could fall over and crush me, so I take a few steps back. Before I leave the room, I notice a brown stain on the bed.

"...Blood."

I realize that this is the spot Kouji-san's dad died. I've heard that in some cases of heart failure, the victim spits up blood. He must have suffered as he died. My chest aches. I turn off the light and leave the room as fast as I can. At least, I try to. My foot hits something hard.

"..."

I look to my feet, but I can't see what it was. I use the flashlight on my phone to peek under the bed. There's a ring case under there. That must be what I kicked. I brush the dust off and place it on the bedside table. It looks like the kind of case someone would put a wedding ring in. I open it up, but there's nothing inside. I suddenly hear a shrill sound, like a scream.

"...Was that the wind?"

It really does sound like someone crying. That sound sends a chill down my spine.

"...Wah!" Someone grabs my shoulder. "O-oh, it's just you, Sakurako-san."

"Is something wrong?"

"No… Nothing, really."

I can't tell her that I was scared of the wind. Especially since it's her. She sees enough disgraceful sides of me, anyway. I can't have her noticing that I was so tense.

"I see. This place is cold… It's warmed up with everyone else. Come help us in the living room."

"Alright."

It feels like someone's watching me, so I take another look into the room before leaving. Of course, all I see is the countless books. I shiver before following Sakurako-san.

Part 5

When I return to the living room I see that Kouji-san, who seems like he's calmed down, is looking outside with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong?"

“The weather is getting worse. We were talking about how it’ll be hard to get to the hotel,” Yachiyo-san replies.

The blizzard makes it look completely white outside.

“I’m worried. Being able to walk to the hotel aside, it’s a complete white-out.” Kouji-san crosses his arms and leans back on the sofa.

“Can’t we use the car?”

“We’d have to have someone at the hotel come pick us up. It’s probably busy at this time of day. What a pain.” Kouji-san says, shaking his head at my question.

I’m impressed, he actually sounds like a manager.

“It can’t be helped, then. We can just wait until peak time passes. Let’s have some tea. There’s hot chocolate, too.”

“Yeah, let’s. There’s some emergency food in this place. There’s biscuits in the basement we can have if anyone is hungry. Lend me a hand, Shoutarou.”

I’m hungry, so I guess I have to. Shouko-san starts preparing the tea, and I start following Kouji-san after some urging. Just then, the lights flash for a moment, then the power goes out in the whole villa.

“Oh my.”

“No way, the power went out?” Yachiyo-san and Shouko-san say anxiously.

“Sakurako, there should be some candles in the sideboard drawer. Flashlights, too,” Kouji-san says.

The two of us change our destination to the boiler room to find the breaker.

“It’s no good. This isn’t it… the snow must have snapped an electrical wire or something,” Kouji-san says in a bitter voice after investigating the breaker. “There must be some mountaineering equipment in the basement. I think there’s a penlight there, too,” he continues.

Fortunately, even though the sun has set, the snow illuminates the room slightly so I can see my feet. I turn on the light on my phone for now. Kouji-san decides to contact the hotel for now. Fortunately, the hotel hasn’t lost power. However, they say it’s too dangerous to use the car because it’s snowing so heavily.

“Then I guess we’ll be staying here for the night…”

“Sorry about all the trouble during your vacation.” Kouji-san says to me while we head down to the basement.

“No worries. Isn’t this kind of exciting? It’s thrilling, like a mini disaster.”

Kouji-san sounds upset, so I try to sound as happy as I can. It’s a good thing we’re inside, so even if help doesn’t arrive, it won’t turn into a life-or-death situation from just one night. It’s 100 times better than the snowmobile disaster.

“You think so…? Even though I’m with Shouko-neesan, nothing is going right.”

“...With Shouko-san?”

“...”

I tried to ignore it, but I can’t help but ask. I glance over at him. It’s hard, but I can tell his expression is saying “oh crap.”

“...Is that why you always teased Ariwara-san as kids?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Kouji-san and Ariwara-san are cousins who are close in age, so they often played together as kids. When I first met Kouji-san, I heard that he was often mean to Ariwara-san. Shouko-san always loved Ariwara-san as a younger brother, so maybe Kouji-san didn't like that.

"...Kouji-san, could it be that you've always—"

"Is it wrong?! Nee-san is single right now, too. We're cousins, so even if I feel that way… We can't get married."

I guess I hit the nail on the head. Before I could even finish speaking, Kouji-san cut me off.

"Well, legally we could."

Isn't the bigger issue whether Shouko-san feels the same way or not?

"It's fine as long as our families are registered separately. She's dependable and nice. Meanwhile, I'm a slob, so I'm sure she could never like me that way. I don't want to be like my grandfather, so I want to be faithful to one woman."

He realizes that someone might overhear, so he lowers his voice. He sounds so serious, he must really like her. I know for sure that she's a really nice lady.

"...That's why I didn't like him when we first met."

"So, Shoutarou, when you appeared in front of me, claiming to be her boyfriend, I…"

So that's why he wasn't rude to me when we met this time

"Then… You don't have a significant other right now?"

"I don't. How could I find a partner when I know Shouko-neesan is single right now?"

I just nod agreeingly and say "I see." I'm surprised. However… Kouji-san keeps sincerely thinking about and helping the woman he longs for. I feel a strange sense of empathy for him.

"Since you know, you should cooperate."

"Cooperating is all well and good, but… I don't think it's possible."

"Why not?!"

"Shouko-san is a widow, but… I think she still holds her husband close to her heart."

She's had a hard time since the death of her husband, Akihito-san, but I think she still loves him. Even now, I can still feel his presence inside of her when we talk.

"A dead person…" Kouji-san mutters. "It's not fair. Over time only the good memories remain, so since I'm still alive, I don't have a chance."

"..."

No chance, huh? Soutarou-kun passes through my mind for a moment, and makes my chest hurt.

"...But since we're alive, we can make lots and lots of new memories instead."

I see. I can make memories with Sakurako-san that Soutarou-kun couldn't make.

"But for now, let's deal with our current situation. We could use this as an opportunity to make some good memories, right?"

"I hope so…" Kouji-san mutters weakly.

When we go down to the basement, just as expected, this place has emergency supplies since it's deep in the mountains. There's alpha rice, bread, and biscuits. In addition to chocolate bars and youkan emergency rations, there's even freeze-dried space food. On top of the takoyaki and stew, there's even roll cakes and ice cream. Sakurako-san is going to be happy about this.

"Is this gas for a portable stove? It's not an electric one?"

“No… I’m pretty sure it uses induction heating.”

“...Then we can’t even boil water.”

“Ah…”

There’s drinking water with the outdoor equipment. In addition to the knives, lighter, lantern, and penlight, there’s a can of white gas and a small Bunsen burner, so I decide to borrow it. It’s a different brand from the one I have, but I can probably make it work. When we return to the living room, Shouko-san and the others are at a loss for what to do since they can’t boil the water. I’m a little hesitant to use it inside, but I carefully pump the gas into the Bunsen burner. As I work on preheating the burner, I notice that Shouko-san, Yachiyo-san, and Kouji-san are all watching me anxiously. It’s a bit tricky, so I understand why they don’t have much reason to believe in me. But fortunately my mountaineering loving grandpa taught me how to efficiently get a fire going. Even though I’m unfamiliar with this tool, I think I understand how it works.

“It should be okay now. You can heat up the water.”

I managed to do it right on my first try. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see the blue flames start to sway. Now I just need to be careful about the ventilation for the fire.

“...You’re more useful than you look,” Kouji-san says earnestly.

“I picked it up while going mountain climbing with my grandpa,” I reply with a composed expression.

On the inside my heart is pounding, though. I wonder if Sakurako-san thinks I look cool? However, when I look up, I see Sakurako-san looking serious while sitting on the sofa and picking which sweet she wants to eat without paying any attention to me. I’m kind of disappointed. But anyway, we’ve secured hot water with this. You can’t boil much at once, but if you use a small pot a few times, you can prepare meals for several people.

“This is kind of fun somehow.”

“Be careful, it’s hot,” Shouko-san says while handing me some warm hot chocolate with a smile.

We don’t have any homo milk, so I dissolve the Royce chocolate stick in the hot water then pour skim milk in. The rich flavour calms me down.

“Anyway… These things are giving me a bad feeling.” Yachiyo-san, who insisted on not having any sweets because she’s on a diet, suddenly shivers.

The living room is only illuminated by the orange glow of the lanterns. Because of that, the taxidermied animals in the living room cast long, dark shadows.

“He never liked using the living room much, since he always said it was creepy. He felt bad about trying to get rid of all these taxidermied animals, since his uncle gave them to him. In the end, he could never bring himself to do it.” Kouji-san forces a smile. “Mostly because… They look like they’re still alive.” He says, looking up at the bear towering over him.

“That’s true… How are we even going to dispose of them, anyway?”

“Don’t worry about that. You can put them out with the regular non-burnable garbage. For the big ones, you just put them with the other large trash.” Sakurako-san says nonchalantly, while eating a roll cake.

Kouji-san and I look at each other in shock.

“In the regular garbage… If you don’t hold a ceremony for them at the temple, won’t they curse you or something?”

“How can you say that without feeling guilty? As usual, you don’t understand the ‘human heart’ at all.”

Kouji-san hands some hot chocolate to Sakurako-san with a stunned expression. That’s right, I almost forgot that Kouji-san and Sakurako-san have known each other since they were kids.

“We should look into an auction we can take them to later… Anyway, isn’t it getting colder in here?” Yachiyo-san says, pouring herself some tea and shivers. She’s strict with money.

It definitely feels colder, my fingertips are starting to hurt.

“That's right, the heater must have stopped.” Kouji-san says. We all look at each other.

“...Right, it would make sense that the FF stove would stop when the power goes out.”

It burns kerosene, but it still needs electricity to run.

“I saw an oil stove that wasn’t being used earlier. It might be a type that can run without power.”

I suddenly remember it. While we were investigating the basement, there was an old type of oil stove down there.

“I remember that, now that you mention it. Let’s go get it ready. There’s kerosene there, too. We might have to all spend the night in the living room, but it can’t be helped.”

“Can’t we use the fireplace?”

I point at the fireplace. With just one stove, there’s a limit to how much it can warm us up. Unlike the fireplace at Sakurako-san’s house, this one clearly has traces from ash in it.

“Apparently they need heating even in the summer if it’s a cold day. I heard my dad liked it, but the chimney hasn’t been cleaned since he last did it.”

For the time being, we bring up the kerosene from the basement and distribute the fleece blankets. I decide to try to clean the fireplace to the best of my ability. Sure, the cramped chimney is scary, but the room is too large for a single heater to warm up.

“It’s not the kind of chimney that you can go down like Santa Clause. Can I clean it if I go from the bottom?” I ask, illuminating the fireplace with the penlight in one hand.

“I watched a horror movie as a kid where the heroine’s dad was pretending to be Santa and climbed down the chimney and broke his neck… I wonder if that’ll happen to you.”

“...”

Kouji-san just said something really unpleasant.

“Also, I played a game where as soon as you look into the fireplace a man with scissors pops out and drags you inside…”

“Please stop! You’re scaring me!”

“Hahaha, well… it’s cold, but we have blankets, so you don’t need to overdo it. Why don’t we all just stay here for today and try to pass the time?”

“I guess so, but…”

It may be fine for now, but it’s fairly airtight in here. As the night goes on and the temperature drops we’ll need to have adequate ventilation for the lanterns and Bunsen burner. I think it would be better if the room was a bit warmer, if possible. Anyway, I decide to at least clean the grime out of the fireplace. The ash and unburned charcoal make a pile of dust. I put the penlight in my mouth and grab the antique, brass fire tongs, a shovel, and hand brush that

are next to the fireplace. I start by grabbing the charcoal with the tongs, then notice something is inside.

"Hm?"

"Is something wrong?" Kouji-san asks from the couch, which he returned to after feeling satisfied with teasing me.

It doesn't seem like anything interesting, so I just let it be for now

"No… There's just some garbage or something…"

Somehow, I get a bad feeling. I adjust my grip, and carefully wipe away the ash.

"A bone?"

In the pile of dirt, I notice an object that's a milky brown colour.

"...Hm?"

As I move the dust, I gradually reveal the full thing.

"Eek!"

I fall backwards.

"Sakurako-san!"

I choke down my screams and call her over. Sakurako-san rushes over in response.

"A bone, huh?" Sakurako-san whistles, holding a it up to the light.

Among the remaining dust and ash, there's several bones and an unburned, black object of some unrecognizable shape. There's only a few bones from the centre, with a couple radiating out from it. It's a hand. A human palm. I'm shocked. In the fireplace, there's just a human hand buried under the ashes,

Part 6

Sakurako-san scoops the hand up, and spreads it out on some newspaper on the dining table to reassemble.

"P-please stop… It's best to just leave it to the police."

"Police? Don't worry, none of you will get in trouble for this."

Yachiyo-san and Kouji-san are both trembling on the couch. Shouko-san is glaring at Sakurako-san with a grim expression, but she doesn't say anything. I'm sure she knows as well as I do that nothing we say will matter.

"Oh…? What's this now?"

Sakurako-san is acting like a kid with a toy, after she's been bored all evening.

"Hmm?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it just seems like it wasn't burning for very long. There's still pieces of cartilage."

She's taking a good look at the bones, using only the light from her lantern. I can't stop watching her fingers. They're always pretty, but in the lantern light they look even more so than usual.

"Boy, do you know what bone this is?"

"Huh?! Ah, it's… from a human, isn't it?"

While I watch her in fascination, Sakurako-san laughs and beckons me over to her.

"It's a hand."

“Hand?”

She spreads her palm toward me. I do as I’m told and spread out my hand. Sakurako-san holds my hand, and entwines her pale fingers with mine. I’m surprised.

“Ah, um!”

It hurts? Before I even know what she’s doing, I feel a dull ache in my fingers.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

She’s trying to bend my fingers toward the back of my hand, against the direction the joints move in.

“It won’t bend.”

“Of course it won’t!”

Sakurako-san laughs loudly at my response.

“However, by looking at the cartilage here, the owner of this palm had a wider range of motion. Do you know why that is?”

“No, I don’t,” I answer a bit sulkily while shaking my hand.

“Think carefully. As a hint, I’ll tell you that it’s in this room.”

“In the room?”

“...A brown bear?” Shouko-san answers before I can.

“Yes. At least, there’s no other animal in this room that’s this size and has the same hand shape as a human, right?” Shouko-san says, tilting her head slightly to the side.

Sakurako-san smiles sweetly.

“As expected of Ms. Shouko. That’s correct.”

Upon hearing the answer, the mood in the room instantly relaxes. It’s a huge relief. However, I’m sure there’s not that many animals with large, humanoid hands.

“So this is a bear’s hand, then?”

“That’s right. A brown bear’s palm is very similar to a human’s. Sometimes the police even bring them in to forensics professors.”

Shouko-san breathes a sigh of relief, then brings the lantern closer to her so she can peel the apples we brought. It smells nice. I love apples. Kouji-san must be pretending to read a book, since he isn’t sitting in the light… I guess since he’s sitting next to Shouko-san. He must be nervous.

“It… Was kind of exciting, thinking we found human remains.”

I give Sakurako-san a strained smile. She shakes her head at me with a smile on her face.

“No, it’s not wrong to call these human remains.”

“...Hm?”

“Look, there’s one extra finger. This is only the left hand. If you compare the thickness of the bones, I’m sure you’ll notice it. Only this bone is a slightly different size from the rest.”

“...”

Everyone freezes. Sakurako-san is the only one who looks happy, as she lovingly holds the bone up to the light.

“It’s probably a ring finger? Based on the cross-section, it looks like it was cut off by a knife, or something.”

Shouko-san drops the knife she was using to cut apples. Kouji-san yelps as the knife grazes his leg.

“No, it wasn’t that knife. It was probably thicker than that.”

I suddenly remember seeing a survival knife in the basement, along with a hatchet. I wonder if it was from those…

“But why would there be a human finger in the fireplace?!” Kouji-san says in a trembling voice.

Even if we put the bear paw aside, who burned a human finger?

“No, you should be asking ‘why a bear’s paw in the first place?’ That’s the best place to start. It’s unnatural to find something like that.”

She’s right, I can’t think of any reason someone would burn a bear paw in their fireplace. If it was a chicken wing or something, someone could have thrown it there instead of cleaning up. But this is a bear. It’s not that easy to get a hold of something like this.

“Since we’re in the mountains… maybe it’s from a bear hotpot… or something?”

“But why bother putting the leftovers in the fireplace? And why just the hand?”

“Maybe they burned more, but just that part didn’t burn as much? And it’s dangerous to leave food scraps in the outside garbage bins, since it attracts bears, so maybe they didn’t want to take it out?” Kouji-san adds to my response.

“The flames in a fireplace won’t turn bones to ash. If they put other pieces of the bear in the fire, there would be more bones left.”

“Then…?”

We all look at each other, trying to find an answer. Yachiyo-san is completely freaked out. She’s sitting silently with a disgusted look on her face, and looks like she feels sick.

“Most likely, the owner of this hand is the one that stuffed the brown bear.” Sakurako-san says, assuming we’ve given up, and points to the decorative bear taxidermy.

“Huh? The taxidermy? But are there bones in taxidermied animals?”

I’m surprised. I know basically nothing about taxidermy, but I thought they took out the insides of the animal and stuffed it with another material to give it shape.

“It’s true that most of the time they’re stuffed with styrofoam, urethane foam, or things like that. However, on parts like the head and hands, bones are sometimes used.” Sakurako-san says, and suggests we cut off the other hand to find out what’s in it.

However, when nobody agrees, she grimaces, and sits down roughly on the couch. I sit on the armrest next to her and spread out the bones on the dining table.

“Now then… Why was someone hiding a human finger in there?”

Shouko-san breathes a sigh of relief that Kouji-san managed to prevent further harm to the bear.

“There’s no reason to burn the bear paw. If you’re trying to hide something like that, you wouldn’t put it in the fireplace, right?”

“You can’t figure it out?” Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

“First of all, why did they feel the need to burn a taxidermied paw in the fireplace? I want to know that.”

“...It was a funeral. They probably felt reluctant to just throw the broken part away. They say fire has the ability to purify bad things, right? I don’t know what Sakurako thinks, though.”

That sounds like the most plausible answer I’ve heard so far. However, I soon realize it doesn’t answer everything. If that were the case, there’s no reason for the human bone.

"...Was it camouflage. So they'd think it's a human hand?" I say, wracking my brain for an answer.

"...Good answer. It's for camouflage. It's the opposite, though. They put the bear bones in to hide the human bone. They burned the bear's paw with the finger to hide it. The criminal was probably familiar with bear skeletons." Sakurako-san switches the way she's crossing her long legs, and snickers. "I've only picked one up in the mountains once before. At the time, I also thought it might really be a human. I was so excited that I secretly brought it back to my house. When gran found out she jumped so much she almost threw out her back, then she called my uncle at the hospital and-" Sakurako-san can't stop giggling as she talks, as if it's the funniest thing ever.

However, nobody else thinks it's funny. I guess it's a joke only 'bone people' would get.

"That's enough!" Chiyoda-san shouts, her patience finally running out.

"This is definitely a misunderstanding. This must be a bear's finger, as well! So let's stop talking about this!"

"You're right… let's stop. I know, let's get ready for bed. Does anyone need anything?" Shouko-san says, raising her voice a bit. She smiles at Kouji-san and I.

Chiyoda-san is done listening to Sakurako-san, and covers both her ears. I might be imagining it, but aren't they acting a little weird?

"That's not true. I wouldn't mix up bear and human bones. This is absolutely a human being's left ring finger!"

Sakurako-san gets drowned out. Rather, she gets aggressively shut down.

"But if Sakurako's right, then maybe…"

I notice Shouko-san's face turn pale. Yachiyo-san looks at me like I'm causing her a huge inconvenience. It's like she's begging me to stop Sakurako-san.

"Sakurako-san, um-"

"Listen up. This is something abnormal. I'm sure that you know that bones are confined inside of living creatures, Ms. Shouko. This means that you can't just find a human finger or bear paw in a fireplace. Someone has to have intentionally burned it here." Sakurako-san declares as she stands up.

She's right, though. Everyone in the room shifts around awkwardly. Yachiyo-san and Shouko-san look like they can hardly contain how badly they don't want her to keep talking.

"...It was the left ring finger, right?" Kouji-san mumbles, finally adding something to the conversation.

"Kou-chan, it's fine. You don't have to force yourself to talk to her, okay? Alright, we should change the topic. Let's all eat some apples instead. I'll peel some right now." Shouko-san says in a cheerful voice, as if she's trying to fool us into thinking she's fine.

She sits down next to Kouji-san. She hugs Kouji-san around his shoulders in an attempt to cheer him up, but Kouji-san doesn't raise his head.

"Ms. Shouko, there's definitely something weird about this. I want to know the truth. I want to know why this bone is with the bear paw." Sakurako-san says.

"...There's a lot of things in this world that don't make sense. Things aren't always as clear cut as you think." Shouko-san's soft expression doesn't change, but her voice turns icy cold. She's definitely angry.

“But still! Nothing feels worse than not understanding the reason behind something. I’m not talking about something as vague as ‘good and evil’. I want to know the truth behind the facts and outcome.”

“Did you even consider how the rest of us feel?! I’m begging you, just let it go!” Yachiyo-san suddenly shouts.

She sounds like she could cry at any moment. I’m starting to realize that something isn’t right here. The two of them are hiding something. It’s probably related to the finger in the fireplace.

“Sakurako-san… Shouko-san and the others are right. You should calm down a little.” I say to Sakurako-san, trying to relieve the tension in the air.

Sakurako-san opens her mouth to say something, but when she sees my serious expression, she backs down. For a while, there’s silence. Kouji-san finally lets out a deep sigh, breaking the awkward silence.

“My dad had an injury.” Kouji-san mumbles.

Shouko-san inhales sharply.

“After he died, I saw that he had a bandage going between his middle and pinky fingers on his left hand... I never saw the injury directly.”

Kouji-san lifts his head. He stares at Shouko-san, but she turns away and hangs her head.

“There’s no way… He didn’t have his ring finger?”

“...”

No one answers his question. In other words, Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san don’t deny it.

“...Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“It was… your grandmother’s decision. The doctor said it has nothing to do with the cause of his death, so she said it would only cause you unnecessary suffering…”

Yachiyo-san covers her face, unable to answer him, so Shouko-san answers instead. She lets out a deep sigh.

“Why are you talking about her? What do you mean!”

Shouko-san remains silent, as if she can’t answer his questions. Kouji-san grabs both of Shouko-san’s hands, begging for an answer. However, she doesn’t give him one. Only one answer comes to my mind. I don’t know if I should say anything, since Shouko-san won’t… but I don’t want to deceive Kouji-san. He seems like he’s in so much pain.

“Could it be… that… ring finger?”

The ring finger on the left hand comes with a special meaning.

“The ring finger on the left hand… Is it something to do with his wedding ring?”

“That can’t be. He loved doing detailed work. That’s why he didn’t wear his wedding ring on a daily basis. It would get in the way when he moved his fingers.”

“Huh? But there was a wedding ring case in the bedroom. It was empty, but it looked like it held 2 rings.”

Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san both let out another sigh. I realize I said something I shouldn’t have.

“...I see, so that’s why.” Sakurako-san says. Clearly she understands better than me. “So that’s why the two of you wanted to keep Kouji away from this place. It wasn’t the villa you wanted to clean up, but the traces of ‘someone else’ that were left here.” Sakurako-san says

proudly, then leans back into the couch. She seems satisfied with her answer. “I finally understand. You were trying to get rid of the traces of a certain woman- well, they don’t necessarily have to be a woman. You were quickly trying to put out the fire, and tried to hide any evidence that Kouji’s father had his lover with him.”

Sakurako-san looks at Yachiyo-san and Shouko-san. Neither of them make eye contact with her.

“His… Lover?” Kouji-san mumbles.

“Yes. We all know that you’ve always been against your grandfather bouncing between women all the time. Your father wasn’t honest in his marriage, yet he condemned cheating.”

“Then… He had a mistress?”

“Isn’t it strange? Why would someone who lives in Sapporo have a villa way out in the mountains like this? Why did he sometimes come out here without telling his family? I’m sure it was because he was meeting up with his secret lover.”

The pieces are finally falling into place. Sakurako-san gives a satisfied smile. It was something as simple as that. I don’t think anyone other than Sakurako-san thinks this is a “good” conclusion. Me included.

“Then both of you… Knew from the start...?” Kouji-san has to force himself to get the words out.

“...We did. He’d known her for almost 10 years. Her name is Fumino-san. Everyone kept it a secret because we knew you’d never forgive him.” Yachiyo-san readies herself for a moment before finally answering. “The night he died, it seems like he was with her. I think she was after his money. She wasn’t here anymore by the time we arrived. We don’t know what she stole. His wallet was still here, but there was no money left in it.” Yachiyo-san says in a disgusted voice.

“Koushirou-niisan wasn’t the type of person who carried money with him, so we don’t really know if anything was actually stolen. We weren’t aware of how vast his collection was… At least she left the lamps.”

She might have wanted to phrase that differently, considering we’re sitting here by candle light.

“But… It seems like his left ring finger was cut off after he died**.** There must have been a ring on it… I can’t think of any other reason, at least. It was probably to destroy evidence, rather than to make money off of it. She ended up taking the ring, but burning the finger.”

“The doctor said there was no biological reaction to the wound. I guess she couldn’t get the ring off after he died, so she opted to just cut off the whole finger. On the other hand, she might have wanted to carry around a reminder of her former lover, like Sada Abe…” Shouko-san adds, staring at the fireplace.

“But like Sacchan said, she probably burned the finger just to hide the evidence.” Shouko-san says with a long sigh.

“I’m sorry for not saying anything. Koushirou-ojisama was hiding his mistress for your sake. He loved you, so he didn’t want you to be ashamed of him.”

“For my sake…? If he really loved me, he would’ve owned up to it! He should have gotten divorced, if that's how he felt! He was just lying, and doing whatever he wanted… How can you expect me to forgive him for that?!” Kouji-san yells.

An apple rolls off of Shouko-san’s lap. It rolls across the floor, landing next to my feet. Its red colour reminds me of blood.

“So basically… Fumino-san left her family so she could come build a new family here?”

“Huh….?” Shouko-san says monotonously.

Kouji-san freezes in place.

“Fumino-san was somewhat prepared for everything, since your father had agreed to his arranged marriage. He really was that man’s son… Your mother was very generous, so she tolerated his mistress. They talked about getting a divorce, but Fumino-san was never acknowledged.” Yachiyo-san says, disgusted.

‘That man,’ she said… She must be talking about Kouji-san’s grandfather, who got one of his maids pregnant when he was already 90 years old. I’ve heard from Ariwara-san that the Toudou family is like a colony of ants, all descended from Seijirou Toudou’s bloodline.

“I don’t think Koushirou-niisan’s choice was the right one to make. However, he couldn’t just leave the one he loves. I think that by building a villa here, he was able to compromise between her and his family.” Yachiyo-san says, then looks at Sakurako-san.

“...So? Are you satisfied?”

“With what?”

“I’m asking if you’re satisfied with getting everything that I, Koushirou-niisan, and everyone else wanted to hide out into the open for the sake of your curiosity.”

“Yachiyo-san… That’s not the case.” I say as Sakurako-san stirs for a moment after having such harsh words thrown at her.

I understand. Sakurako-san meant no ill will. She was just curious, and has such a strong desire to know more.

“Then what was all this about?! Kouji didn’t need to know all this. He could have just been left with good memories of his father!” Her sharp words gradually turn into clear anger.

“We wanted to keep it hidden, that should be a good enough reason! If you think you can just expose other people and have it be fine as long as you try to sweeten it up, you’re sorely mistaken! Normal people don’t want to see bones!”

“Is it okay to advert your eyes just because you don’t want to see something? Isn’t that just postponing the inevitable result? The bones and truth don’t change.”

“It’s fine, I’m okay!” Kouji-san suddenly stands up.

He stands between Yachiyo-san and Sakurako-san to cut them off.

“It’s fine… I’m glad you two are worried about me, but… I’ve always felt like something was off… and now I know why. Besides… I’m not a kid anymore, so I can handle it.”

He picks up the apple that had fallen on the floor and places it on Sakurako-san’s lap.

“At least he was probably happy. It was hard for me when I thought he passed away all alone… Well, I’m surprised, but I’m also relieved. Though I may have been better off not knowing…” Kouji-san says almost silently.

Perhaps the reason he can’t speak clearly is because he’s not really sure what to say. He looks at Sakurako-san.

“My head feels a bit clearer now, thank you.”

“...I see.”

Kouji-san thanks her so directly that Sakurako-san shrinks back a bit. It seems like she wasn’t expecting to be thanked, since she turns away with her lips pointed awkwardly.

“...I found sleeping pills. They were next to the bed.”

There's a brief silence. It's Shouko-san that breaks the silence this time. She coughs weakly to hide her tears.

"There was no reaction at the site of the finger wound suggesting that he was alive. That's why... Fumino-san felt really guilty about how my uncle chose death himself. She felt like it was her fault that he died. However, when the doctor investigated, they found that he had the same heart disease as my grandfather."

"I see…" Kouji-san lowers his head. "...Well, it doesn't matter! It's a son's job to protect his mother. I'll take good care of her, in place of my dad. Though, I might be a bit too young for that. Maybe I'll take her abroad, and she can fall in love with some young guy in Italy." He says in the happiest tone he can.

He starts to smile, even though his eyes are wet with tears.

"So… Who was my father's mistress? What's she doing now? She wasn't invited to dad's funeral, right?" Kouji-san sounds like he's forcing himself to ask.

"Well… We can't get in touch with her." Yachiyo-san replies, shaking her head.

"...I see. Well, I hope she's doing well. I just hope she kept the ring for herself, rather than sell it."

"Wedding rings don't sell for much money." Sakurako-san interjects.

"...Well, if she kept it to remember dad by and she's cherishing it… Then I'm sure dad's happy. It's fine. I'm sure… it's fine." Kouji-san's voice starts to shake.

"Kou-chan…"

Shouko-san holds out her hand to him, but he gently brushes her off, saying he wants to be alone. I understand why he wouldn't want to cry in front of her. I hand him the warmed fleece blanket we have as he leaves the room.

Part 7

I expected it to turn out to be a sad night, but Kouji-san found some alcohol, so the rest of the evening was spent getting drunk and having fun. Of course, I can't drink, and Sakurako-san didn't have too much. Still, we spend the night having fun until morning arrives. Yachiyo-san is a heavy drinker, but I was surprised that Shouko-san could handle her alcohol even better than Yachiyo-san. Compared to Kouji-san who went down instantly, Shouko-san seems like a bottomless pit.

At around 7am, Ootomo-san drops by for a visit. The snowstorm finally calmed down, so he hurried to check on us. It must have been hard for him to get out here, since his face is all red and there's snow stuck to his eyebrows.

"Thank you, Ootomo-san!" Kouji-san, who's still drinking, cheerfully hugs Ootomo-san.

He gently removes Kouji-san with a troubled expression.

"No, rather, I'm sorry for coming so early in the morning. I think it would be best if you all go to the hotel for now… Owner?"

However, Ootomo-san's kind words fade out as if he's distracted by something. Kouji-san staggers outside.

"Kouji-san?!"

We hurriedly chase after him. He's standing outside, looking up at the snow covered pine trees in a daze. The branches of the ashen pine trees sway gently in the wind with the morning sunlight streaming through.

"They're creeping pines," Kouji-san mutters, pointing at the trees.

"Huh?"

"There's a lot of creeping pines that live here… 10 years ago, my dad… met a woman under a creeping pine," Kouji-san murmurs to himself. Ootomo-san grimaces.

"So you finally realized it."

Kouji-san nods in response. Ootomo-san puts the fleece blanket over his shoulders.

"...Occasionally they'd both be at this villa."

"I've never met her… what kind of person is she?"

"She has a bright smile, and looks really kind. She liked mountain climbing, and the two of them would often go sketch in the mountains, or go stargazing," Ootomo-san says in a soft voice, filling the awkward silence.

Kouji-san smiles faintly.

"I see… I'm glad he had fun. After my father died, I went to Asahidake and-"

"Wait! Did you say the two of them?" Sakurako-san suddenly interjects.

I hear Yachiyo-san click her tongue. However, Sakurako-san doesn't seem to care, and approaches Ootomo-san.

"Did the two of them travel here together? In one car?"

"Ah… yes. They didn't want anyone to notice, like a family member, so… They always came in their own cars."

"...Cars?"

"Huh?"

"How many cars were here on the morning Koshirou-shi died?"

Shouko-san and Yachiyo-san both look like they've figured it out.

"Only Koushirou-niisan's car was here."

Yachiyo-san hugs herself to keep from shivering in the cold.

"But since they were both into mountain climbing, she could have walked down, or hitch hiked. It could have just happened to be a day when they didn't bring two cars. There wasn't any snow at the time, so there weren't any tire tracks left." Shouko-san says gently.

But everyone looks stiff. Koushirou-san was found early in the morning. It was only a few hours after he died. I can't imagine someone would walk down the mountain when it's still dark out.

"But, well… As Shouko-san said, they might have just brought one car that day, for whatever reason…"

"..."

"Sakurako-san?"

Sakurako-san heads back into the villa without listening to the rest of us. I don't have any choice but to follow her.

"Did Koushirou-shi design this house himself? Including the floor plan?"

"Huh? No… The floor plan was… Hey, Sakurako! Wait!"

Sakurako-san seems to lose her patience, and throws open the door. She looks into each room, then finally opens the door to the bedroom where the body was found.

“Hmph.” She grunts.

“What’s wrong?”

She suddenly grabs my shoulder and pushes me into the room.

“Wh- What are you doing?!”

“Boy, look at this room and tell me your honest thoughts about it.”

“Huh?”

“Just hurry up and do it!” She says angrily.

“Uh… umm…. There’s a lot of books…”

“I meant about the feeling it gives you.”

I have no idea what she wants from me. She clearly wants something specific from me. She won’t let me go until I find out exactly what that is.

“...It’s creepy.”

“Why?”

“Someone died here. Besides that, it feels kind of oppressive… like the walls are closing in on me…”

“I see, thank you. Good answer.” Sakurako-san grins.

“Huh?”

“Unfortunately, men and women tend to perceive spatial awareness differently. In general, men are better at perceiving spaces. That’s why women tend to have difficulty parallel parking or parking in a garage. I am, unfortunately, very aware of this inferiority. That’s why I thought I’d get your perspective.”

“O-oh…”

I don’t know why we’re suddenly talking about parallel parking.

“You’re likely instinctively aware that this room is a bit small. Kouji, Koushirou-shi had experience studying abroad in America, correct?”

“Yeah… Why?”

Before I knew it, Kouji-san has come up behind us, and Sakurako-san is talking to him.

“My homestay house had a panic room.”

“Panic room?” It’s an unfamiliar word.

“My house has one, too. The safe room. It can also be called a panic room, it’s the place you go to if there’s an emergency. My dad’s bedroom has a special door. If you take refuge in it, absolutely no one can get in.”

Kouji-san adds that his father learned about crime prevention while in America.

“But… the door in this bedroom is normal.” He checks the door, then shrugs.

“Ah, it was the door. By the way, was Koushirou-shi serious about his faith?”

“No. Rather, he wasn’t religious at all.”

“I see.”

Neither I, nor Kouji-san, understand what Sakurako-san is trying to say. I do, however, know that she’s looking for something. I feel strangely uneasy. Sakurako-san heads straight to the bookshelf behind us. She looks around, and soon pulls out a single book. It’s an old bible.

“This must be it… at least, it’s certainly not a book bad people would be likely to touch.” She lets out a snicker.

“Ah…” Kouji-san sounds surprised.

We watch as she pulls the Bible off the shelf. There's a keyhole on the wall behind the bookshelf where the Bible was.

"A hidden door…?"

Kouji-san rushes over, flustered. He searches the keychain on his belt.

"It's true… There's only one key that I don't know what it's for. Could it be for this…?"

It seems the key for this hidden door is on the keychain left behind by his father. When we move the bookshelf, we find the whole door. It has the same pattern as the wallpaper, so if it wasn't for the keyhole, I never would have noticed it. As expected, the one mysterious key fits into the lock. As he turns the key, a chilly breeze flows from inside.

"This sound…"

I hear that sad groaning noise again, and my body stiffens.

"It's the sound of the vents. There's stairs," Sakurako-san says.

I'm scared, and feel sad. The sound of this wind really sounds like a woman crying. As soon you open the door, there's a staircase leading down. There's cold, damp air coming up from below. I shiver, and take the penlight out of my pocket. Sakurako-san snatches it from me, and dashes ahead. It's too dark to see where I'm walking, so I use the light from my phone. It only has 25% battery left, but it can't be helped.

"Why is there a hidden room…?" Kouji-san says, groaning.

He also has a small flashlight that he got from somewhere. The area is illuminated by the pale light of LEDs.

"This villa was built so he could meet up with his lover. He must have made preparations in case his family suddenly visited."

"How did you know it was in the bedroom?"

I've also been wondering that. However, Sakurako-san just snorts as if it's a stupid question.

"It's simple. The bedroom is the only place where you can't escape with your mistress."

"Oh…" Kouji-san nods.

Now that she's explained it, it does seem like a stupid question.

"It's cold…"

"He probably wasn't thinking too much about the temperature when he made this place."

It's freezing cold once we reach the basement. Sakurako-san shines the light around, showing that it's a room with a bed and desk. There's an air conditioner and a fridge, too. If it came down to it, someone could live down here for at least a few days. Still, the air is completely chilled. The slight dampness in the air only serves to steal more heat from my body. I can see my breath forming clouds in the light. My hands are shaking, but I still shine my phone's flashlight around.

"A bathtub? In a place like this?"

There's just a bathtub sitting in the middle of the room, like you'd see in a foreign movie. One of those claw footed ones. It's weird. I shine my light inside the tub.

"...Huh?"

My heart skips a beat. It looks like there's a mannequin laying in the frozen water. No, to be more accurate, it looks like there's a person laying in the water. They're pale. It looks lifeless, but alive at the same time. That shouldn't be possible. Still, it looks beautiful. This long, black hair floating on the water and translucent skin couldn't possibly belong to a corpse. If it was a

corpse, how would it end up here? It looks unchanged from when it was alive, like “death” hasn’t reached it yet. Kouji-san has held onto the key to this room the whole time. Besides, we would have noticed if someone went in or out during the blackout. This is definitely a doll. That’s what I think, at least… But the more I look at it, the more human it seems.

I cautiously bring my phone closer to it. I notice that one of the doll’s hands is out of the tub. The pale light shimmers on the back of her hand. There’s soft, thin hairs… My fear suddenly explodes inside of me.

“S-Sakurako-san!” I fall backwards onto the bed.

The tub shakes from the movement. That pale hand swings in front of me. There’s two rings shining on her finger…

“...What do we have here?” Sakurako-san says happily, reaching into the tub.

She cracks the ice that’s floating on the water to reveal the rest of the “doll.”

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

Sakurako-san happily nods at the “doll.” I hear a soft knocking sound.

“Hmm, I see.”

“What was that?!”

“That’s the sound of adipocere.”

“Huh?”

“When the fat in a human body has completely turned into adipocere, it sounds like you’re hitting a wall if you tap it.”

“Adipocere…”

She puts the “doll” back in the water. I hear the rings fall off the hand, so I try to pick them up. I bump into Kouji-san, who is standing stock still by the entrance.

“It’s difficult to get the exact conditions for adipocere to form, but a low temperature and moderate humidity are a must. Basically, an environment where bacteria won’t multiply. Fortunately, this place stays cold, even in the summer. It usually takes a while for it to fully form. I can’t tell exactly how long it has been since she died, but the sound was quite high, so I’d estimate 2-3 months. Once the internal organs start to turn into adipocere, the sound lowers. You would hear that sound at around 4-5 months after death.”

“...Then, like I thought, it’s a corpse… But why is it in the middle of this room?!”

“That is the question. There doesn’t appear to be any major trauma to the body, but… There’s an empty package of sleeping pills. Maybe she drowned or froze to death in her sleep. This is a truly beautiful corpse. But it’s as the boy said, it’s strange for there to be a bathtub here.”

Sakurako-san shines the penlight at her feet. Sure enough, there’s an empty sleeve of sleeping pills. Kouji-san walks over, like he noticed something.

“Kouji-san…”

“It’s a painting.”

“A painting?”

Kouji-san shines a light behind Sakurako-san. There’s something that looks like a canvas. The painting shows a woman in a white dress laying in a bathtub that’s filled with water. There’s lots of flowers floating around her. This must be “her.” It looks exactly like the woman in the bathtub here…

“Ophelia…” Kouji-san mumbles.

“John Everett Millais’ painting Ophelia, from the pre-raphaelite brotherhood. It’s a painting depicting a scene from Shakespeare’s “Hamlet.” In the scene, Ophelia drowns after being overcome with grief. It’s probably a homage to that painting… It’s my father’s painting, after all.”

Lying in a river surrounded by flowers and vegetation, Ophelia quietly tries to end her life. Nestled amongst the rich greenery and flowers, she’s pale, and about to turn from a living being to a “thing”. I’ve seen that beautiful painting depicting pure misery in an art textbook. She looks toward the sky with a sad expression in the picture Koushirou-san drew, as well. It’s a sad, lonely picture, yet it’s incredibly beautiful. I notice something engraved on the edge of the painting. I can’t read it out loud.

-I’m sorry.

Those letters that don’t even seem human contain an indescribable sorrow.

“From here on is just a guess,” Sakurako-san says as she picks up the ring that has fallen off of the woman’s finger. “Didn’t this woman also wrongly assume Koushirou-shi’s death was a suicide? I’m sure she was incredibly distraught and worried about the situation. I’m not sure if she was trying to escape, but considering she cut off the finger to get the ring back, it’s questionable.”

There’s a metallic sound. It’s the sound of the two rings colliding.

“But then, Koushirou-shi’s wife came to the villa. She panicked and threw the finger into the fireplace, tossed in the bear’s hand as camouflage, and hid in the secret room. I don’t know whether or not she intended to die at that point. But since she tried to hide, she probably thought she could escape eventually.”

“So she hid here because she panicked?”

“Oh, and also… I’m sure she could hear his wife mourning during all that time.”

“...”

Kouji-san silently runs his fingers along the painting. Over the engraved apology. There’s a palette knife that’s been stained red nearby.

“Kouji-san…”

“She must have been accustomed to using sharp palette knives.”

He stares at the blade-like tip of the knife with a scary look in his eyes. I approach him, and gently have him let go of it.

“But… to end her own life…” Kouji-san says weakly.

“Even though it’s a corpse, cutting off a finger takes a certain amount of preparation. Since the cause of death was heart failure, the ring likely couldn’t have just been pulled off due to the swelling. If she cut it off out of love, she would have saved the finger instead of burning it. Considering that, she probably didn’t have time to prepare, right? Yet she still wanted the ring.”

Sakurako-san breathes on her fingertips, trying to warm them from the cold of the cellar. Her white breath sways in the light.

“Whether it was because she heard the sound of his wife’s car, or if someone called the phone in advance… it’s difficult for me to guess the details of the situation now that the site has changed. It’s simply beyond my imagination. However, there’s no doubt that she was in an extremely tense situation.”

“So she couldn’t make a calm judgement…”

“I don’t know what pushed her to do it the most. It could have been the thought that her loved one died alone, feelings of guilt, or just sadness. They had separate bedrooms, so there was probably a crack in their relationship, right? For example, if she was starting to talk about divorce. His wife didn’t think he died of illness, either. It’s no wonder she thinks similar things.”

...So she killed herself.

“There may have been other reasons, as well. Maybe because she thought she couldn’t escape, or hearing the mourning and regret in his wife’s voice… Or maybe she felt like she had to follow him. So, she ended her life here. It was a secret until just now.”

She stayed here, unchanged, waiting for someone to discover her.

“My dad told me that he first saw that painting in the British Museum. Ophelia’s model, Elizabeth Siddal, became ill with pneumonia after laying in a bathtub while modelling… She didn’t have a very good life.” Kouji-san says, but it sounds like he’s forcing himself.

He walks up to the tub, but he can’t bring himself to look at the corpse. He kneels on the floor, hugging the two rings to his chest.

“Elizabeth had such a sad life… And… It’s my fault this happened! She was still young… She must have had a life to go back to!”

“It’s not your fault. There’s always the possibility that she was afraid of being exposed for what she was doing. She chose to hide in the basement to protect the life of the person she loved. She just wanted them both to keep their dignity… It’s sad, but you shouldn’t blame yourself.” Sakurako-san says, helping Kouji-san stand up and taking the rings. “But that’s completely worthless. All of this is just for the sake of self-pity and self-satisfaction. The only thing that becomes complete with death is a specimen. Even if one chooses to die by their own hand, there’s nothing else to gain.” Sakurako-san says, dropping the two rings into the tub.

The dull sound of the rings hitting the bottom sound like two sad sighs.

Final part

“Honestly… We need Nacchan for this kind of thing.” Shouko-san says angrily while looking at the police officers who came due to our report.

“What should I even say to Shou-chan’s mom…”

“It’s okay to keep it a secret.” I say with a forced smile.

It’s unlikely to be considered a crime, so it probably won’t make the news. As long as I don’t say anything, nobody will find out.

“I wonder why this kind of thing always happens with Saachan around.”

“It’s not my fault,” Sakurako-san says, shrugging her shoulders.

“Then whose fault do you say it is?” I ask. She immediately points at me. “Huh?”

“Yours, boy. You’re very lucky,” Sakurako-san says, grinning.

Next to her, Shouko-san is holding her head, seemingly due to a headache.

“You might be right…”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“I was thinking that, too. Maybe it’s Shou-chan that’s summoning the corpses. After all, Sacchan never found a human corpse before, right?” Shouko-san says with a sour expression.

“Eh…”

I look at Sakurako-san, shocked. She nods.

“B-but I’d never found a corpse before, either!” I reply, flustered. Sakurako-san pats my head.

“Then we must just be a good match. Put us together and you find a corpse. Isn’t that wonderful? I’m very grateful to you,” Sakurako-san says, smiling ear to ear while holding the bones from the bear’s hand.

“No way…”

I’m not happy about having that kind of compatibility. I’m crestfallen. It feels like even the cold is scolding me.

Epilogue

My trip to Asahidake was terrible. Even though I was only there for one night, it feels like so much happened. Apparently Shouko-san, Kouji-san, and Yachiyo-san have to stay for a bit longer, so in the end, Ootomo-san only brings Sakurako-san and I to the station. It was scary, but the mountains in winter are still beautiful. They have a certain isolated, untouched beauty to them. However, fear also adds to their beauty. It feels similar to Sakurako-san, somehow.

“Sakurako!”

Kouji-san rushes over while we’re climbing into Ootomo-san’s car.

“You’re leaving already?”

“Yeah, thanks for taking care of me during the trip.”

“...No, it was you that took care of me. It’s a pain to admit, but thank you. Naoe is going to be lucky to have you as a wife. I’m not 100% envious of him, though.” Kouji-san says, sniffling from the cold. It kind of seems like he’s hiding his embarrassment, though.

“What is it?”

He stares at us as if he still has something to say.

“Nothing… there’s just one thing I wanted to ask,” he says, and beckons me over.

“Shoutarou.”

“Yeah?”

I stand in front of Kouji-san. He looks at Sakurako-san, then grabs both my shoulders.

“Is this kid just a substitute for Souta?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, the air freezes. Between us, no, rather inside my chest, the chilly wind of Asahidake blows.

“...What makes you say that?”

“Don’t try to deceive me, just tell me clearly. I’m sure Shoutarou wants to hear it, as well. This hazy feeling makes me uncomfortable, too.” Kouji-san says in a (probably intentionally) light tone. He says it like it’s nothing.

However, no matter how cheerful he sounds, it has a lot of meaning. I, at least, don’t feel like listening to this.

“A substitute… That’s ridiculous.” Sakurako-san replies, turning away from us and staring at the ground. Her voice is frail. It’s not like her at all.

“Really? But all of us assumed that was why you hang out with him.”

Sakurako-san doesn't move an inch. I really don't want to hear this, so I try to escape from Kouji-san's grasp, but I can't get free.

"At least, Ozawa-san and I have both been thinking that. We all know how hard it was for your family after you lost Souta… Especially for you."

"Umm… Please stop, Kouji-san."

"Of course, I'm not trying to say that Shoutarou isn't a good guy or anything. Shouko-neesan thinks so, too. Still, it's not right, and I feel bad for Shoutarou. I think it's better if you stop meeting like this."

"...Please, just stop." I try to move away.

"Shoutarou, you can't get away." Kouji-san holds my arms behind my back so that I can't move.

"Stop it! I don't want to hear this!"

"Boy…" Sakurako-san makes a small gasp.

Probably because I'm crying. Yeah, it must be because I'm crying. I'm pathetic, like a little kid. I just can't stand it anymore. The tears feel hot against my cold cheeks.

"Please let me go! Let go!"

No matter how much I struggle, he doesn't let go. He's hugging me with all his might. It suddenly makes me remember my dad. I shouldn't have any memories of being hugged by my dad, though. Sakurako-san touches my cheek with her finger.

"...Do you really think that?"

She wipes the tears off my cheeks with a sad, lonely looking smile.

"I like even numbers, since they can be divided easily. You're the same, right Sakurako? You like things to be clear-cut."

"That's right," Sakurako-san nods and wipes my tears with her hand.

However, my tears won't stop flowing one after another, like blood from a wound.

"The answer to Kouji's question is both yes and no. Giving a simple answer is difficult. It's true that meeting you, boy, brought back memories of Soutarou. When you're at our house, I can't deny that it feels like he's come home," Sakurako-san says in a lonely voice.

I remember the first time I visited the Kujou residence. She looked a bit surprised when I said my name is Shoutarou.

"Gran is especially pleased. He was a special child to her… he brought her joy that I couldn't. And now you do, as well. I just make her worry, and can't bring her joy like you do."

"That's not true…"

That's right, it's not true. Gran really, truly loves Sakurako-san. She doesn't only bring worry. However, she holds out her hand to stop me from objecting.

"I don't think that I'm not loved. Water is thicker than blood for me. However, I'm not the girl she wants. I can't give gran what she wants. So it's true that I want you to be Soutarou… Since I probably don't have much time left with gran. It's not enough to repay her, but I at least want the rest of her time here to be fulfilling."

Somehow, I understand what Sakurako-san is trying to say. There's certainly parts of Sakurako-san that are far different from normal people. The way she shows love is far from what the average person wants.

“I think I should have opposed it stronger when gran wanted to celebrate his 20th birthday. You aren’t Soutarou. However, I couldn’t say no to gran. Gran really should understand. That part of gran has always bothered me. Forgive me, boy. I’m using you.”

“...”

I can't criticize her words. I understand that Sakurako-san is being kind. I can see how important gran is to Sakurako-san. After all, I’d do anything for my grandpas. However, even though I understand, my heart doesn’t. I feel absolutely crushed. I’m lonely. The fact that I’m my own person is being completely passed by.

“But I’m different. To me, you and Soutarou are completely different.”

“...Sakurako… san?”

“That boy is dead. He’s nothing but bones now. I held his bones. It’s something I’ll never forget for the rest of my life. Until then, I thought all bones were beautiful, but those ones were different.”

She lets out a long sigh to calm herself down.

“Actually… When his body was discovered, I was shaking. I was in shock to see the boy I knew had turned to nothing but bone. It felt like an electric shock. At first, I couldn’t understand what that feeling was, but… When I stared into his vacant eye sockets, I understood… I was excited.” She says, looking up at the sky to help her remember. “Soutarou’s bones were beautiful. Pure, fragile, yet seemingly full of life. They were truly beautiful. I will never forget how I trembled with joy upon seeing his beautiful bones. Beauty, above anger, grief, or sorrow. I don’t think I’ll ever see a bone as beautiful as Soutarou’s skull. That’s why I know better than anyone that he will never come back to life. He already turned to bones.”

“You were excited to see your brother’s skeleton…?” Kouji-san’s arms tremble, still wrapped around me.

I fully understand why. Sakurako-san thinks that even the bones of her late brother are as beautiful as any other. The beautiful person standing in front of me looks more like some other creature, merely disguised as a human. I’ve always been aware of it. I’m scared, angry, and disgusted at the differences between us. I’ve always been angry that there’s a gap between us that I could never cross. I’m even more angry that Isozaki-sensei was right when he said that Sakurako-san isn’t normal. She is overwhelmingly different from me. I’ll never be able to understand her, no matter how much I try.

My chest suddenly feels lighter. Her train of thought will always be different from mine, since she’s a “phantom”. Recognizing the difference between us makes it feel like something foggy inside of me has cleared up. I can admit that I’ll never understand her.

“If I said that I don’t see Soutarou when I look at you, I’d be lying. So I want to make you happy. I never want to see you suffering. But you’re your own person. I’m not asking you to look like Soutarou. But… Unfortunately, I can’t live without Soutarou.” Sakurako-san says, looking lonely.

She clenches her fist on her chest. Life without her brother isn’t a source of pain, but of sadness, for her.

“I didn’t want you to get hurt because of me. That's why I chose to part ways with you… My own stubbornness ended up getting you hurt. B-but I never want to let go of your hand again. I’ll never repeat that mistake. Shoutarou, I swear I’ll protect you from anything bad...“

“From Hanabusa,” Sakurako-san says almost silently.

I heard it, though. She said it like it's an oath.

"Come on… Say it so I can understand better," Kouji-san, who has been listening to us silently for a little while, says with a huff.

Sakurako-san furrows her brow and crosses her arms, as if she's troubled.

A while later…

"...Being with you is very fun for me," Sakurako-san says, looking straight at me. She's smiling a bit, and looks shy.

"—"

I can't reply. I hang my head down as tears well up in my eyes. They feel hot, but they're happy tears.

"Aw man, you made him cry again," Kouji-san laughs as he holds out his arms to hug me.

"I-it's because you were asking weird questions!" Sakurako-san says to Kouji-san. She's flustered because I started crying again.

"Come on, boy, don't cry… I know, I'll assemble these beautiful bear paw bones and give them to you. No, wait, you love dogs. They're small breeds, but I have some lovely specimens. Want me to assemble one for you? No, wait, Hector. You can inherit his bones once he dies."

She's seriously thinking about giving away the bones from her beloved pet just because I like dogs. She's the same weirdo as ever. I force a smile and don't say anything. With her, that's the best thing to do. The bones of her pet dog are important to her. I should be proud that she'd be willing to give them to me.

"Sakurako… did you seriously just say that?"

However, Kouji-san, who doesn't understand her very well, is looking at Sakurako-san with an increasingly astonished expression.

"Did I say something weird?" Sakurako-san tilts her head, looking puzzled. Kouji-san looks like he has a headache.

He holds his forehead for a moment, then suddenly gives my shoulder a firm pat, as if he's regained his composure. I think it's supposed to mean "isn't that nice?" or "do you understand that?" or something. I smile and nod to him.

"Oh right, I have something nice to show you."

Sakurako-san reaches into her back pocket and holds something out. Kouji-san and I are both nervous to see what it is. With her, it wouldn't be unusual for her to pull out human bones or something.

"It's a roll cake."

I don't know what to think at first, seeing her grinning while holding a roll cake from the space food in the villa. She pulls a black, freeze dried spiral from the package.

"It's chocolate flavoured. It's special, so I saved it for later." She hands it to me, saying, "it's special, but I'll give it to you."

Does she really think this is going to put me in a better mood? It's frustrating, but I can't help laughing. Kouji-san bursts into laughter soon after. The tears are making my eyes sting, but I can't stop laughing. Sakurako-san is the one who doesn't know what to say, this time.

"What's so funny?!" She yells, looking disappointed.

I politely hand her back the roll cake, and look up at the sky. The sky is clear and blue again, after the storm. When I get home, I'm sure it'll look more like spring is approaching than it

does here. I like harvesting the butterbur sprouts from under the snow each year. I used to hate butterbur miso because it was bitter, but I like it now. It'll be spring soon, which brings butterflies.

A piece of snow being blown by the wind looks like a white butterfly to me for a moment. I usually look forward to the weather warming up, but I'm dreading it this year. But time won't stop ticking. Is the real storm yet to come? I suddenly remember Wolf leaving me. I won't be able to pet my beloved dog again.

"What's wrong, boy?"

"...Nothing."

I don't tell Sakurako-san about the uneasiness sprouting in my heart. I want to talk about anything except that. I just want to hear her voice. Just that much is fine.

"It's nothing at all." I smile and sit down next to her.

Special Short Story: Heart's Gift

There was a lot of snow this year. Since they haven't been keeping up with shovelling the snow, there's only a thin path through the trees to Sakurako-san's house. I ring the doorbell, and soon hear a happy "woof!" from behind the door.

"Settle down… Welcome!" Gran greets me with a smile as she tries to stop Hector from jumping all over me.

"Is your knee okay?"

I could hear her slowly making her way to the entrance. Her knees and back don't seem to be doing well these days.

"I'm fine. I don't know whether it's because the heat is on higher, or because of my warm momohiki, but it's a lot better this year."

"The underclothes they've been making recently are amazing, aren't they?"

We chat a bit while heading to the living room. Sakurako-san is reading a book in her usual chair. Hector puts his nose on Sakurako-san's lap as if he's saying, "Shoutarou-san is here!" before sitting by my feet.

"How's your injury?"

"It doesn't hurt too much, as long as I don't touch it or move too much. It's hard having my dominant hand injured, though." I reply, petting Hector with my left hand.

It's been 10 days since the Valentine's Day incident that left me with a cut on my right hand and two stitches. It was red and swollen last week, but since the stitches got taken out, it's been a lot better. Humans really are resilient.

"But Shouko-san invited me to a villa in Asahidake... I hope it's better by then."

"You got your stitches out, so you should be fine. You're young, so you'll heal fast. Just eat well and sleep well, and you'll be better in no time."

"But… I can't shovel snow like this."

It's not too bad living my normal life, but if I put too much pressure on it, it hurts a lot. That's why I haven't been able to help shovel snow for Sakurako-san lately.

“Don’t worry about it. Gran and I got by with just the two of us until now. We can handle it,” Sakurako-san says, smiling kindly when she sees the anxiety in my expression.

I guess it’s true that they’ve handled it until recently. They could always just hire someone to remove the snow, I guess. I want to help as much as I can when I’m able to, though. Besides, there’s Hector’s walks, as well.

“Sorry, Hector. We’ll go on a walk soon, okay?”

I apologize to him while he looks up at me with anticipation with the leash in his mouth. Hector is surprisingly strong, so walking with him during winter makes me a little uneasy. Especially since the road is so slippery today, I’d probably fall… and injure my hand again.

“So, what brings you here today?” Sakurako-san asks me while taking the leash from Hector.

“I called him,” Gran answers before I can, and sets down some tea in front of me.

It’s Modi Assam tea from the usual store. It smells sweet, like flowers. The way the Kujou house always smells like tea relaxes me every time I come here. Gran hands Sakurako-san a cup of tea, then quickly returns to her territory in the kitchen. She returns with balls of yarn.

“I knit this for you, young master,” She says, and takes out a pair of mittens, a hat, and a scarf knit from navy blue and red wool.

“Huh? You knit this for me?”

“You’re always walking Hector and shovelling snow for us. Besides, in winter I always feel like knitting, but the young lady doesn’t like yarn very much.”

“It’s only natural. It holds a lot of static electricity,” Sakurako-san says, wrinkling her nose.

Does she hate static electricity that much? Yarn is so warm.

“Honestly, I wanted to give it to you last year, but… I wasn’t sure if you were going to come here again…”

Gran drops her gaze and looks a bit lonely.

“Thank you so much. I’ll still need them for at least another month.”

I give my biggest smile as I take gran’s hand knit gloves. It’s not the type with 5 separate fingers, they’re mittens. They’re perfect for shovelling snow. They’re the perfect size, so my hands feel warm as soon as I put them on. I’m glad that the part that covers my wrists is a bit long so that snow doesn’t get in.

“Isn’t that nice,” Sakurako-san says, smiling while I try on the matching hat and scarf. I’m flooded with a wave of happiness.

“Yeah. I feel like I should get a present for gran now, though…”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy as long as I know you’ll keep coming over to play.”

I suddenly feel like I should apologize, but gran just smiles and puts a homemade shortbread (which has a texture somewhere between bread and a cookie) on my plate with a scoop of fresh cream. Even though she says that, I still feel a little awkward. I’m not super tactful, so I don’t want to offend her.

“But… today I actually have a present… for Sakurako-san…”

“For me?” Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

“Yeah… It’s like that reverse chocolate thing, but also friendship chocolate… I heard it’s popular.”

“Yuriko said something similar.”

I'm giving it to her 10 days after Valentine's Day because I missed the timing and got hurt in various ways, among other things. I look at gran in an effort to apologize. She smiles as nods, as if to tell me not to worry about it.

"Unfortunately, it's not your favourite chocolate," I say as I pull the blue package out of my bag that I wrapped with wrapping paper I got for 100 yen.

I place the blue package in her palm.

"...What is this?" She picks it up suspiciously and examines me.

I urge her to open it.

"..."

She violently tears open the paper without any more hesitation. Inside is a wooden box I bought for 100 yen. She carefully opens the lid with her long fingers. The hinge makes a small creak as it opens.

"I see..."

She lets out a long, rising breath. Her pale fingers pull out the white object from inside.

"A sacrum and coccyx."

"...Yeah."

Of course she can tell at a glance. She holds the triangular, fist-sized bone in her palm. A sacrum and coccyx. They come from the middle of the body, connecting the spine to the pelvis. The coccyx is a screw-like bone connected to the bottom of the sacrum.

"How did you get this?"

"Since I couldn't get the real thing, I borrowed a model from Isozaki-sensei to help make it. My older brother likes making models with stone powder clay, so I thought I'd try it, too."

I'm starting to feel shy, so I shrug and act like it's nothing. In reality, it was a painstaking process, and I had to remake it countless times.

"Tell me what you've learned about these bones."

...I thought this might happen. Sakurako-san leans back into her chair and stares at me with the model in her hand. I clear my throat before answering.

"Umm… It's made of 5 sacral vertebrae and 3-5 caudal vertebrae, and it's part of the hips. It's an inverted triangle shape, with the widest part at the top fitting together with the fifth lumbar vertebra. There's 4 pairs of holes along it that allow the spinal nerves to pass through."

I guess it was worth practicing at home, since I didn't stumble on my words. There's no need for me to ask if I'm right. Sakurako-san has the brightest smile on her face.

"Do you know if this bone is male or female?"

"Huh….? Oh…. I don't really know that much. I know that women have a wider sacrum, when men have a longer one, but I don't really know what they look like for comparison."

I did make this model by recreating the school's anatomical model, which would have a specific gender, but I don't really know if it's a female or a male bone.

"But… I feel like it's a woman, somehow?"

I really don't know, though. I just answered like that because I feel like it has a gentle roundness to it, somehow. Sakurako-san smiles wide again.

"You're correct. That's amazing. There's just one more thing. Remember that a male sacrum has a bigger curve than a female one does. But it seems like you've learned a lot. Well done!"

"Really?"

“Yeah. You did a very good job. Your gift made me extremely happy.”

Hooray! I do a little fist pump on the inside.

“...But why the sacrum?”

“Huh? Because… I thought it looked kind of heart shaped…”

It’s for Valentine’s Day, so I thought a heart shape would be fitting.

“While I was helping Isozaki-sensei I started thinking about how it looks like a heart. I looked it up and apparently in Greek it means “holy”, so I thought it had a strong meaning. In ancient Egypt it was also considered a sacred bone, which I thought was interesting…”

Sakurako-san quietly listens to me explain with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand.

“...Um?”

“It’s fine. Continue.”

“...The sacrum is also the last bone to decompose, so I thought it suited you. I’m sure that you won’t change after 10, or 50 years from now, Sakurako-san.”

Sakurako-san gives a light laugh. “That’s not true, even I’ll grow old one day.”

“No. It’s as the young master says, you haven't changed since you were a child. Though your appearance might change, I’m sure you’ll keep being yourself,” Gran says, backing me up.

“Besides, doesn’t the fact that it’s heart shaped remind you of Sakurako-san?”

Deep inside her, covered by bones, Sakurako-san has a clumsy sort of kindness hidden by her stubborn heart.

“I see, I’m like the sacrum, huh?” Sakurako-san gazes lovingly at the model I made. “...Wait for a moment.”

When Sakurako-san suddenly gets up, Hector, who has been sleeping, wrongly assumes he’s going on a walk. His tail wags as the two of them disappear onto the second floor. Before long she returns with a small plastic case.

“I’m giving this to you.”

“...What is it?”

“A distal phalanx. It’s a bone from your fingertips. Your first knuckle. The bones from the very tips of your fingers. Unfortunately it’s just a replica made from carving deer antlers.”

“Distal phalanx...”

It’s also a very small replica of a bone. The shape reminds me a bit of a nameko or shimeji mushroom.

“Do you know what animal this bone would have come from?”

“I don’t know, but… it’s a human, right? If not, you wouldn’t need a model because you’d have a real one, right?”

“I see. You have some good detective skills. You’re really on the ball today.”

Her praise gives me a strange ticklish feeling. I look at the beautiful distal phalanx while face to face with Sakurako-san. She smells like tea.

“...It’s a very small, modest bone. I love these bones. For many animals, these bones are cone shaped. Among primates, only humans have a flap tip on them. I’ve always thought of it as a special symbol of how humans can hold each other and show love through their fingertips,” Sakurako-san says as she takes out the distal phalanx with her beautiful fingers.

She gently runs her fingers along the bone, as if to comfort it. Even though it’s such a strange action, I end up captivated and have to avert my gaze.

“This small, paltry bone that we can use to convey so many different things… Somehow, it reminds me of you.”

“Of me?”

Sakurako-san returns the bone to the case, and wraps my hand around it. Her hands are warm.

“...I wish you’d compare me to a bigger, cooler bone,” I say, pouting as my heart rate speeds up and my ears turn red.